

BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL  
DISSERTATION

THE CRITICISM OF WILLIAM COWPER, CLASSICAL ROMANTICIST  
BY  
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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
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## OUTLINE

### INTRODUCTION

Introduction. Purpose of the entire work

1. To establish Cowper as a critic
2. To show that his criticism, like his poetry, is that of a classical romanticist
3. To indicate the importance of Cowper in the development of criticism.

#### A. Need for this work.

1. Bulk of Cowper's criticism previously not realized
2. Importance of this criticism not yet pointed out
3. Inadequacy of previous attempts to do this
  - a. My M. A. Thesis
  - b. Willy Hoffmann's doctoral dissertation

#### B. My Master's Thesis

1. A fairly complete compilation of Cowper's critical pronouncements
2. Lacking:
  - a. Careful organization of materials to show the basic principles of Cowper's criticism.
  - b. Complete evaluation of Cowper's criticism and placing of his work in the development of criticism.

#### C. Willy Hoffmann's "William Cowpers Belesenheit und Literarische Kritik"



1. Mainly concerned with index to Cowper's reading.
2. Brief section on his criticism
  - a. Lack of significant organization
  - b. Incompleteness in research
    - 1) Translation
    - 2) Narration
    - 3) Sonnet
  - c. Inaccuracies in evaluation
3. Misconceptions in comparison of Cowper with Addison and Johnson
  - a. Johnson on blank verse
  - b. Johnson on Pope's "Essay on Man"
  - c. Johnson on translation
  - d. Addison on personification

D. Conclusion:-

1. Necessity to combine:
  - a. Complete research of my thesis
  - b. Attempted evaluation of Hoffmann's dissertation
2. To achieve:
  - a. Evaluation of Cowper's criticism
  - b. Comparison of Cowper's criticism with successors as well as with predecessors
  - c. Placing of Cowper as a critic



## I THE CLASSICAL ROMANTIC POET

Introduction. Failure to mention Cowper as a romantic critic

1. Treatments of criticism - omit Cowper entirely
2. Treatments of romanticism - consider Cowper,  
if at all, only as a poet
3. Treatments of his place in the eighteenth century  
romantic movement - fail to do justice  
to him.

A. Historical background of eighteenth century clash  
between romanticism and classicism.

1. Unity of romanticism and classicism - Shakespeare
2. Puritan revolution and results in:
  - a. Milton
  - b. Dryden

B. Separate streams in the eighteenth century

B. Classical continuations

1. Pope
2. Johnson

C. Romantic pioneers and individual contribution of each

1. James Thomson
2. Graveyard school
  - a. Blair
  - b. Young



c. Collins

d. Gray

3. Mediaeval and Celtic interest

a. Gray

b. Percy

c. MacPherson

d. Chatterton

4. Later group

a. Crabbe

b. Burns

c. Goldsmith

d. Blake

D. Cowper's place in the development of romantic poetry

1. Preliminary considerations

a. Cowper as representing mid-point in development  
of romanticism

b. Comparison of Cowper and Burns

2. Form and Diction

3. Attitude toward nature

a. Flowers

b. Animals

c. Insight into larger significance

4. Attitude toward man

a. Licit by his social position



- b. Deepened by his religious fervor
- c. Broadened by his humanitarianism

5. Attitude toward country life
  - a. Condemnation of evils of city
  - b. Delight in joys of country
6. Description of domestic details

#### Summary

### II DIFFICULTIES IN FORMING AN ESTIMATE OF COOPER AS A CRITIC

#### Introduction

- A. Necessity of large dependence on letters for critical pronouncements

1. Letters to friends whose work he is judging
  - a. Prejudiced in their favor
  - b. Not wanting to mention severe adverse criticisms if he had them
2. Letters to friends concerning friends
  - a. Enthusiasm given full rein
  - b. No curb on praise since no idea of publication
3. Letters to friends who have sent him books
4. Letters to friends concerning books and writers that displeased him.
5. Evidence of considerable restraint and fairness even under these circumstances
  - a. About those he disliked
  - b. About friends



- B. Poetry the source of some criticism
  - 1. Style naturally heightened for the occasion
  - 2. Problem of determining how much is poetic flight and how much genuine
- C. Prefaces and Essays give more considered opinions
- D. General, constructive criticism sound wherever found

Conclusion

### III COWPER'S OPINIONS ON CRITICISM

#### Introduction

- A. Cowper's dislike for doing critical work for publication
  - 1. Public censure of any work incompatible with his nature
  - 2. Private letters only place he would express criticism
- B. Cowper's qualifications as critic
  - 1. As one who reads for pleasure
  - 2. As a creative writer
    - a. Cowper considers these the best critics
    - b. Pope does not exemplify this
  - 3. As one who has breadth of viewpoint
    - a. Considerable in literary matters
    - b. Negligible in moral and religious matters
- C. Cowper's lack of interest in or qualifications for higher criticism
  - 1. Of Homer
  - 2. Of Shakespeare



- D. Cowper's philosophy of criticism
  - 1. Development of criticism
  - 2. Value of criticism
    - a. Commendable as setting limits
    - b. Valuable where guiding public opinion
    - c. To be condemned where striving to differ from public opinion
- E. Cowper's requirements for a critic
  - 1. Willingness to admit error
  - 2. Citation of examples to substantiate views
  - 3. Respect for personal character of writer criticized
  - 4. Ability to make his material interesting

Conclusion: Tendencies in Cowper's own criticism

- 1. Against eighteenth century critical practices
- 2. On the application of rules
- 3. The classical romanticist

#### IV GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR COMPOSITION

##### Introduction

- A. Opinions influenced by his period
  - 1. Elision
  - 2. Compound epithets
  - 3. Grammatical principles
- B. Opinions valid for all time
  - 1. Parentheses
  - 2. Technical terms



- 3. Revision
- 4. Clearness
- 5. Description

C. Figures of speech

- 1. Metaphors
- 2. Similes
- 3. Mixed figures
- 4. Allegory

D. Satire

- 1. Cowper's natural objection to satire
  - a. Against his nature
  - b. Too undemocratic
- 2. Cowper's occasional approval of satire

E. Various prose types

- 1. Prose style
  - a. Simplicity in prose
  - b. The familiar style in prose
- 2. Historians
- 3. Letter-writing
- 4. Argumentation
- 5. Narrative
- 6. Sentimental novel
- 7. Drama

Summary



## V POETRY AND THE POET

Introduction: Poetry as preferable to prose

### A. The Poet

1. Qualities of true poet
2. Poet as prophet
3. Poet as self critic

### B. True aim of poetry

1. Not for money
2. Not for fame
3. Delight in order to teach

### C. Characteristics of true genius

1. In its early manifestations
2. Absence of imitation
3. Freedom from rules

### D. Cowper's departures from "type" in his own work

1. As noted by critics of his day
2. As shown in his emphases

### E. Fit Subjects for poetry

### F. Style

1. Matter more important than manner
2. Simplicity of style important
3. Energy more desirable than smoothness

### G. Versification - quantitative prosody

### H. Blank verse

1. Comparative difficulty of blank verse and rime



2. Variation of pause
3. Blank verse preferable to rime
4. Language
5. Punctuation

## I. Other poetic types

1. Epic
2. Shorter verse in general
3. Sonnet
4. Ballad
5. Pastoral
6. Ode

## J. Romantic Pioneers

1. Thomson
2. Gray
3. Goldsmith
4. Burns

## Summary

# VI LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

## Introduction

### A. The English Language

1. Its excellencies
2. Its limitations

### B. Other languages

1. French
2. Latin
3. Greek



C. Consideration and criticism of various types of translation

1. Slavishly close
2. Loosely paraphrased
3. Compromise between close and free

D. Other translators of Homer

1. Pope
2. Chapman

E. Cowper's translation of Homer

1. Guiding principles
2. Difficulties encountered

Conclusion

## VII HOMER

Introduction

1. Cowper's attitude toward classics
2. Cowper's admiration for Virgil

A. Concerning authorship of Homeric poems

B. Admiration for Homer

1. Praise of his virtues
2. Mention of his faults
3. Defense of his contribution to a Christian society

C. Excellencies of Homer

1. Simplicity of style
2. Descriptive power
3. Variation of pause



D. Homer's influence on Milton

1. Cowper's opinion
2. Arnold's opinion
3. Addison's opinion

Conclusion

VIII MILTON

Introduction

A. General praise

B. Criticism of lives of Milton

1. Warton
2. Johnson

C. Individual poems

1. Latin poetry
2. "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"
3. "Lycidas"
4. "Paradise Lost"
  - a. General excellence
  - b. Christian subject-matter
  - c. Personification

D. Milton and the ancients

1. Similarity to Homer
2. Superiority to ancients

E. Excellence of composition

F. Versification

1. Elisions



- 2. Manipulation of pause
- 3. Irregular lines

G. Language and diction

- 1. Grammatical errors
- 2. Diction
- 3. Use of English language

H. Imagination

## Conclusion

## IX POPE

Introduction: preference of Dryden to Pope

A. Praise of Pope

- 1. Command of language
- 2. Felicity of expression
- 3. Mastery of rime

B. Condemnation of Pope

- 1. mechanical quality of his verse
- 2. Smoothness
- 3. Foppishness
- 4. Ornament

C. Criticism of Pope's translation of Homer

- 1. Its merits
- 2. Faults others have found in it
- 3. Faults of style
  - a. Ornament
  - b. Diffuseness



c. Over-polish

1. In general

2. In characters

4. Limitations of rhyme

5. Deviations from original

6. General lack of appropriateness to original

D. Estimate of other works of Pope

1. Letters

2. Satire

Conclusion

X JOHNSON

Introduction: Cowper's recognition of importance of  
Johnson

A. Johnson as biographer, praised for -

1. Common sense

2. Downrightness

B. Johnson as critic

1. Recognized as eminent

2. Blamed for -

a. Lack of taste

b. Lack of appreciation of blank verse

c. over-minuteness

C. Johnson as religious writer

D. Cowper's disapproval of -

1. Johnson's adverse criticism of -



- a. Milton
  - 1) Religious differences between Johnson and Milton
  - 2) Political differences between Johnson and Milton
  - 3) Johnson's inability to appreciate blank verse
- b. Watts
- c. Churchill
- d. Prior

2. Johnson's favorable criticism of

- a. Blackmore
- b. Pope's Homer

E. Agreement with Johnson on -

- 1. Hannah More
- 2. Thomson

F. Praise of Johnson's Letters

G. Discussion of biographers of Johnson

- 1. Hawkins
- 2. Boswell

Conclusion

## XI FINAL ESTIMATE OF COWPER AS A CRITIC

### Introduction

A. Representative of his day and influenced by its trends

- 1. Evangelical interests
  - a. "Enthusiasm"
  - b. Pre-occupation with things religious
- 2. Ideas on style
- 3. Estimate of individual authors



B. Showing classical reserve

1. In evidence of formal classical background in education
2. In defense of -
  - a. Quantitative prosody
  - b. Classical elements in
    - 1) Milton
    - 2) Prior
    - 3) Addison
3. Delight to teach
4. Classic, but not neo-classic

C. Showing romantic leanings

1. In choice of subject matter
2. In manner of treatment
3. In attitude toward satire
4. In attitude toward Homer
5. In opinion of -
  - a. Thomson
  - b. Gray
  - c. Goldsmith
  - d. Burns
6. Summary

D. Contributing sound doctrine and making sound observations valid for any period



1. On composition
  - a. Simplicity
  - b. Energy
  - c. Clearness
2. In views on poetry
  - a. Its development
  - b. Its aims
3. In appreciation of great literature
  - a. Bible
  - b. Milton
  - c. Homer
4. In attitude toward criticism
  - a. Critic not to be petty
  - b. Critic to enjoy beauties rather than measure faults

Conclusion



## INTRODUCTION

The intent of the ensuing dissertation is to establish the poet William Cowper as a critic whose opinions and principles are worthy of consideration, and, on the basis of those opinions and principles, to classify him as a classical romanticist. After establishing him as a classical romanticist in his poetry, this treatment will organize and evaluate his critical pronouncements with a view to exhibiting the underlying principles of his critical thinking. The dissertation will conclude with a discussion of the importance of his classical romantic position in the development of criticism, not as an influence but as an indication.

The necessity for such a work in the field of scholarship is indicated first by the large bulk of Cowper's criticism. This criticism was the major portion of the more than two hundred pages of my thesis, "William Cowper as a Representative of Eighteenth Century Criticism"<sup>1</sup>, which is the second indication that the following work is necessary. The incompleteness of the treatment in the above-mentioned thesis finds a close rival in the inadequacy of the evaluation in our third

1. In partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Boston University, 1930



item, Willv Hoffmann's doctoral dissertation, "William Cowpers Belesenheit und Literarische Kritik".<sup>1</sup>

My thesis on Cowper's criticism includes a virtually complete compilation of Cowper's critical pronouncements. Its very completeness in including every word of Cowper's on the subject prevents its being adequately organized to indicate any basic principles which may be evident in the whole. Lacking such an organization and indication of principles, the work naturally makes no adequate evaluation of Cowper's criticism and does not place his work in the development of criticism.

Hoffmann's dissertation devotes some seventy pages of its less than one hundred to a treatment of Cowper's reading that can be termed little more than an index. Representative of its contents is such an entry as:

John Gay (1685-1732)  
 'What d've call it?' (1714) erwähnt 4.VIII.83  
 (I.II 92)

The fact that Cowper mentions the work in a letter of August 4, 1783 found on page 92, volume II of Wright's edition of the letters seems, as information, hardly sufficient reward for having deciphered the author's cryptic reference. Hoffmann gives no key to aid in the

1. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doktorwürde genehmigt von der Philosophischen Fakultät der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin, Juli, 1908.



deciphering of this or any other references, such as "S. III 76, X 239/387" or "C. on F.L. I 39".

Hoffmann's index of Cowper's reading is followed by ten pages under the heading "Grundsätze von C.s Literarischer Kritik". Lest the reader be misled by the title to expect from these pages some revealing comment on Cowper's criticism, Hoffmann declares in his first sentence that from the critical material available in Cowper's writings "lassen sich allgemeine Grundzüge seines Geschmacks erkennen, aber ein vollständiges kritisches Lehrgebäude kann man daraus nich konstruieren."<sup>1</sup> Failed of completeness, his Teutonic mind seems to become inadequate to the struggle. The material presented is divided into sections treating various phases of poetry in general, several types of poetry, and concluding with a comparison of Cowper's criticism with that of Addison and Johnson. The systematic analysis into sections breaks down within each section, sentences being but a hodge-podge of the author's comment, Cowper's own words, and parenthetical cryptic references. The result is little more than the index type of compilation of the earlier portion of the work, now put into sentence form.

One could forgive the flaws in organization if the research behind it were more complete and more accurately evaluated. Less than one half page of scattered gleanings

<sup>1</sup>Hoffmann, op. cit., p. 80



suffices for a treatment of translation, with no mention of Cowper's discussion of the qualities of various languages, nor of his treatment of the work of outstanding translators. No notice at all is taken of Cowper's criticism of fiction and narration in general, despite a large amount of material available both in criticism of specific writers and in statement of underlying principles. No mention is made of the sonnet (upon which Cowper made significant comment) despite the inclusion of an isolated comment on the pastoral. This comment is misinterpreted to favor the pastoral, an error which could not have occurred had the author taken into consideration Cowper's estimate of "the childish prattlement of pastoral compositions" as "indeed ridiculous enough".<sup>1.</sup>

In the comparison of Cowper with Addison and Johnson, Hoffmann has taken quotations out of their context and either deliberately or inadvertently allowed himself to adopt frequent misconceptions. For instance, he says that for Johnson "Reim ist dem Blankvers vorzuziehen".<sup>2</sup> Such a statement hardly can be reconciled with Johnson's opinion as found in his "Life of Milton" - "He that thinks himself capable of astonishing, may write blank verse, but those that hope only to please, must condescend to rhyme."

1. Cowper to Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779

2. Hoffmann, op. cit., p. 90



Further, Hoffmann writes, "J. ist entzückt von 'the dazzling splendour of imagery' und 'such a blaze of embellishments' in Pope's 'Essay on Man'".<sup>1</sup> Taken in its context this highly flattering praise of Johnson's is actually so neutralized by the accompanying criticism as to seem really ironic.<sup>2</sup> Hoffmann concludes his comparison with a discussion of Johnson's views on translation. He writes,

J. verlangt auch möglichsten Anschluss an das Original, soweit es die Verschiedenheit der Sprachen zuläßt, doch gestattet er Zusätze zu Gunsten der Eleganz.<sup>3</sup>

Surely he could not have given this impression of Johnson's demanding accuracy first and allowing elegance in addition had he appreciated the full flavor of Johnson's raptures over the elegance of Pope's translation together with his absolute complacency in the face

1. Hoffmann, op. cit., p. 91

2. "This Essay affords an egregious instance of the predominance of genius, the dazzling splendour of imagery, and the seductive powers of eloquence. Never were penury of knowledge and vulgarity of sentiment so happily disguised . . . never till now recommended by such a blaze of embellishments, or such sweetness of melody . . . it contains more lines unsuccessfully laboured, more harshness of diction, more thoughts imperfectly expressed, more levity without elegance, and more heaviness without strength, than will easily be found in all his other works." Johnson "Life of Pope", pp. 189-190 (Vol. XI in complete Works of Johnson, J. Nichols and Son, London, 1810)

3. Hoffmann, op. cit., p. 92



of its glaring departures from the original text.<sup>1</sup>

Of Addison, Hoffmann writes, "Personifikationen lehnt A. als zu wenig realistisch ab (Spect. No. 273)".

Again a statement is taken out of its context and thus too widely applied. Addison is concerned in this statement only with the allegorical characters of Sin and Death as being inappropriate in Milton's epic.<sup>2</sup>

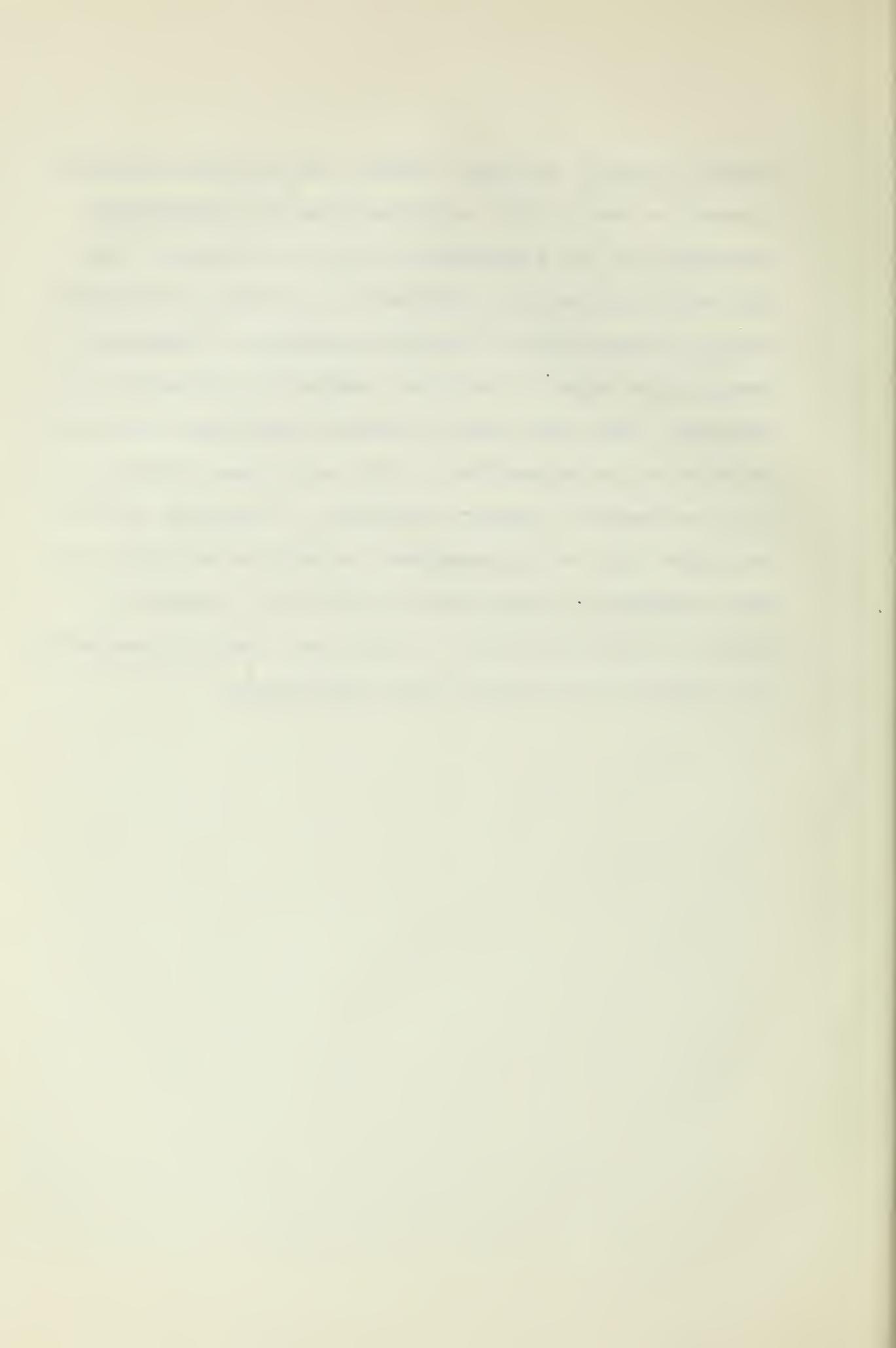
In my opinion, the foregoing evidence is sufficient proof that a desideratum in the field of criticism is a combination of the complete research of my thesis with an evaluation after the manner of Hoffmann, but more exhaustive and accurate. The research now completed has used as source material all of Cowper's writings: poetry,

1. ". . . it is not very likely that he overflowed with Greek." (p. 79) ". . . with Chapman [the inaccuracy of whose version was well known] . . . he had very frequent consultations, and perhaps never translated any passage till he had read his version, which indeed he has been sometimes suspected of "sing instead of the original." (p. 80) ". . . the purpose of a writer is to be read . . . Pope wrote for his own age and his own nation: he knew that it was necessary to colour the images and point the sentiments of his author; he therefore made him graceful, but lost him some of his sublimity." (pp. 185-6) Johnson, op. cit.

2. ". . . I cannot think that persons of such a chimerical existence are proper actors in an epic poem; because there is not that measure of probability annexed to them which is requisite in writing of this kind . . ." (Spect. No. 273)



letters, essays, prefaces, Memoir, and scattered critical comments - some of this material taken from unpublished Cowperiana in the possession of Dr. N. C. Hannay. From this material there was compiled in my thesis a virtually complete source-book of Cowper's criticism. Subsequent research has added a few items, making the collection exhaustive. From this source material significant items will be selected and classified. This should make possible a valid estimate of Cowper's criticism. Comparison of his work with that of his successors as well as with that of his predecessors should make possible the placing of Cowper in the development of criticism. Such an evaluation and placing is the aim of this dissertation.



## I

## THE CLASSICAL ROMANTIC POET

No treatment of English literature has, to date, given to William Cowper any consideration as a romantic critic. Histories of criticism make no mention of him whatever; discussions of romanticism include him, if at all, only as a poet among the pioneers; and reviews of the eighteenth century fail to evaluate him properly as a considerable figure in the early romantic movement, both creative and critical.

As a preliminary to the evaluation of Cowper as a romantic critic, this chapter proposes: first, to discuss the romantic and classic elements in the outstanding early writers - Shakespeare, and Milton; second, to review the basic tenets of neo-augustine classicism as exemplified by Dryden, Pope, and Johnson, and of eighteenth century romanticism; third, to clarify Cowper's position among romantic poets by (a) a rapid review of the contributions of other romantic pioneers, and (b) an analysis of Cowper's own poetry as related to the principles of romanticism.

Since we are to be concerned almost constantly with the terms classicism and romanticism, the meanings to be understood by these terms should be made clear. In the case of romanticism this will be done in the course of the



account of its development. Classicism we shall define at this point. For our purposes this term signifies a first-hand knowledge of the classics and an enthusiastic appreciation of them, together with a sense of the necessity for the individual genius to be pruned and restrained by an inner sense of decorum which demands attention to form and manner of presentation.

In the greatest writers of our earlier English tradition the classic and romantic elements are fairly well balanced. For example, Shakespeare treats the classical story of Antony and Cleopatra with utter disregard of the unities; he adheres religiously to the formal sonnet sequence while using it to present such romantically individual subject matter as gives us "bare, ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" or "the prophetic soul of the world dreaming on things to come". Such a blending of the two influences as we find in Shakespeare is typical of the best in the Elizabethan period. The glorious achievement of that period testifies to the value of such a blend.

But human nature through the ages has proved itself incapable of keeping the middle ground for any considerable length of time. Hence we have Puritanism casting its leaden weight on the side of "Il Penseroso" and completely routing the Allegro element in John Milton.



The younger Milton could present these two views of life with complete absence of prejudice. But the Milton of the later years had devoted all his classic learning and enthusiasm to the service of Puritanism, and so the organ voice of England seldom left its deeper tones except for occasional idylls in Eden (cf. "Paradise Lost", Book IX, lines 839-895). Later poets lavished their admiration on his heavier works and paid the compliment of imitation or borrowing to the lighter (cf. Collins' "Ode to Evening").

Never since the Puritan revolution have the classic and romantic been united. The two streams were separated, apparently forever, when the Puritan opposed simplicity, religious emphasis, and zeal for the common man, against the cavalier preference for orateness, lip religion, and court dominance. What had formerly been a matter of literary taste came to be allied with social, political, and religious doctrines. A beheaded Charles I could be succeeded by a Charles II who could carry on the regal tradition, but all the king's horses and all the king's men could not put literature together again, nor did they wish to.

During the Restoration period, a triumphant court circle, recently returned from French exile, dominated literature with the French emphases on form rather than substance, and brilliancy rather than depth. Dryden, by



means of various religious adjustments, kept in court favor and produced heroic plays, poems, satires, and critical pronouncements fairly consistent with Augustine classicism. No effective challenge came from the Puritan quarter; Milton was dead before much of Dryden's work was produced, and John Bunyan was too much the average Puritan to be equipped with the scholarly background necessary for controversy.

By the turn of the century, political developments, of which "The Glorious Revolution" is typical, tended to lessen court dominance and to favor the common man - or at least the "commoner". Social, political, and religious controversies were rife in the period and did much to influence literary prejudices. Romantic doctrines began to develop, but their expression in the early eighteenth century was feeble by comparison with such outstanding neo-classic expression as that of Pope. His genius completely dominated the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The embodiment of neo-classicism, he gained public favor for all its most urbane, anti-romantic expressions: scorn for older English writers, devotion to the ancients, "rules", emphasis on form, polished diction, wit, "nature methodized".

These rules of old discovered, not devised,  
Are Nature still, but nature methodized. 1

1. Pope "Essay on Criticism, lines 88, 89.



"Windsor Forest" was his nearest approach to a genuine view of nature, and even that fore-shadowed the man who would revel in the methodized nature of his formal gardens at Twickenham. As for man, he was either a philosophical concept in an "essay", considered only from the viewpoint of his manners, or else an artificial property - a "conscious swain" - in an equally artificial pastoral scene. Later in the century, Dr. Johnson continued to defend the classic position. Although he was too much a man of sense to allow critical doctrine to lead him to excess, his social prejudices, Tory politics, and Church of England religion influenced him strongly and frequently colored his literary judgment when the author under his foot was a non-conformist. Nevertheless, he had progressed enough to deplore the excess of classical allusion in Milton (cf. his criticism of "Lycidas") and to admire openly James Thomson's first hand treatment of nature.

Thomson it was who first secured note-worthy recognition for the increasing tendency toward romanticism. His first-hand treatments of nature, though possessing negligible intrinsic merit, are immensely significant in the part they played. They first turned public attention toward the emphases that had been increasing in frequency in the work of various romantic pioneers. To be sure, his work presents only one phase, nature in her broader



aspects - storm, cloud formations ("Spring" lines 147-155, "Winter" lines 223-228), fertile fields ("Autumn" 314-315), any large picture - small details are infrequent, local references insignificant, and man but a minor trimming in the landscape ("Spring" 170-172).

Those elements of eighteenth century romanticism not found in Thomson we may well summarize at this point. The sense of freedom he exemplified only in subject matter, whereas later writers extended it to form, individual enthusiasms, and expressions of the imagination. The picturesque played some part in his descriptions but never led him to the "gothic" excesses of some nor to the veneration of the early English writers or of mediaeval chivalric settings. His treatment of nature was not concerned with nature in its relation to man; he had no such philosophy of nature as was later developed by Wordsworth. Nor did he consider man from the individual, personal viewpoint of later writers, although there was some conventional religion and humanitarianism in his work ("Autumn", lines 350-359).

Other poets, less strikingly significant as romantic pioneers, may be considered in the schools of which they have come to be known as members. The "graveyard school" brings us the earliest eighteenth century poetic expression of gothic picturesqueness. Robert Blair's "The Grave" shows the gothic influence in such macabre details as



"the witching time of night", "wild shrieks",  
 Midst skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms:  
 Where light-heel'd ghosts, and visionary shades,  
 Beneath the wan cold moon (as fame reports) <sup>1</sup>  
 Embodied, thick, perform their mystic rounds."<sup>1</sup>

The romantic interest in humanity gives us the schoolboy whistling to keep his courage up, but the predominant melancholy outlook soon prefers "the new-made widow . . . prone on the lowly grave".<sup>2</sup>

Melancholy of mood rather more than of locality pervades Young's "Night Thoughts". His noble aspirations are at times reminiscent of Milton, for example - "fix my firm resolve Wisdom to wed",<sup>3</sup> but his ideas and phraseology more directly echo Shakespeare - "Tired Nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep!"<sup>4</sup> "if dreams infest the grave",<sup>5</sup> and the lines on man, "How complicate, how wonderful is man!"<sup>6</sup>

Milton's influence (especially "Il Penseroso") is dominant in Collins' "Ode to Evening", in phraseology the strongest link between Milton and his romantic imitators. One could read the poem among Milton's and believe it to be his - "nymphs", "the bright-haired sun",

1. Blair "The Grave" lines 23-26

2. Ibid., lines 72 and 77

3. Young "Night Thoughts", lines 50-51

4. Ibid., line 1

5. Ibid., line 8

6. Ibid., lines 68-89



a star's "paly circlet" seen out of their element when separated from Milton by a half century. Yet there are numerous details and moods in the poem that are equally at home in Milton or in the early eighteenth century romantic melancholy: "the weak-ey'd bat", "shrill shriek", "harlets brown", "dim-discover'd towers".

The use of such details is seen to the greatest advantage, in the graveyard school, in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". Here a poet has produced that rare gem, a poem thoroughly typical of its period and yet undated in appeal. The setting has all the gothic trappings - churchyard, tolling curfew, "ivy-mantled tow'r", "moping owl", and yew-tree. But against the sombre background there is a treatment of "the short and simple annals of the poor" - a presentation of the smaller details of common life, in contrast with the more elegant routine, to show that the more genuine values are inherent in the less pompous. In the small details presented there are echoes of Milton, as there are also in the gloomy picturesqueness of the scene, but there is a flavor in the whole and a humanitarianism accompanying it that look forward to the later romanticists.

Gray is less popularly remembered for his interest in the older ballads, especially in the Celtic material. Not only do we have poems of his own showing this interest,



but there are also his expressions of interest in Percy's "Reliques of Ancient English Poetry" and in Macpherson's Ossianic material. Such was the romantic interest in the Celtic and mediaeval that the Ossianic hoax was generally accepted by specialists, enthusiasm running so high as to exclude a common sense viewpoint such as might have seen the flaws. Even after Johnson's common sense had revealed the forgery, MacPherson was widely acclaimed for his work. Thomas Chatterton's Rowley poems show again how a forgery could find readers whom enthusiasm - this time for mediaevalism - could sway more than cold critical sense. Unfortunately for Chatterton, his fate proved more romantic than his material, and that too early in his life for him to survive as anything but an example of the mediaeval enthusiasm of the romanticists.

Returning to the main stream of romantic treatment of man and nature, we find George Crabbe bringing into his poetry a direct expression of rebellion against the neo-classic "tinsel trappings of poetic pride".<sup>1</sup> Living as he did on the barren coast, he was repeatedly impressed with the discrepancies between pastoral prettiness and the actuality - "peasants now Resign their pipes and plod behind the plough."<sup>2</sup> So he flung a challenge to poets of the school of Pope -

1. Crabbe, "The Village", Book I, line 48

2. Ibid., lines 23-4



From Truth to Nature shall we widely stray,<sup>1</sup>  
Where Virgil, not where Fancy, leads the way?

He had no quarrel with the form of the neo-classicists, in fact, he was quite consistent in using the closed couplet for most of his writing. But his quarrel with the unreality of classic pastorals lent sombre color to all his pictures of man and nature; his realism is pessimistic and permeated with a seeming satisfaction in disregarding any optimistic possibilities. A half grudging inclusion of a bit of beauty -

With mingled tints the rocky coasts abound,<sup>2</sup>  
And a sad splendor vainly shines around

is but material for comparison of this false beauty with "folly's dress", the "mimic Rose" on the cheek of the harlot, a subject redolent with the sentimentalism many romantics (e.g. Burns and Goldsmith) lavish on their treatment of humanity. Crabbe's people seem all to find life futile - if old, they are wearied, neglected, soured; if young, they are weighed down with labor or bent on evil purposes - for example, the story of Peter Grimes in "The Burrough",<sup>3</sup> the description of the gipsies in the "Tales",<sup>4</sup> and the young pirates in "The Village".<sup>5</sup> His descriptions of nature are characterized by "thin harvest", "withered

George Crabbe, "The Village" Book I, lines 19 and 20

2. Ibid., lines 77,78.

3. George Crabbe, "The Burrough", lines 1-11

4. Crabbe, "Tales", no. X, lines 141-195

5. Crabbe, "The Village", Book I, lines 66-68



"ears", "rank weeds", "blighted rye", <sup>1</sup> "a few dull flowers" of "reeds where bitter waters run". <sup>2</sup> Throughout, one has the feeling that Crabbe is picturing this because he blames someone for the whole thing, or at least that he brings the matter up because he wishes to be unpleasant about it.

On the other hand, Burns could present nature and man as found among Scotland's barren highlands, and make the picture appealing by an all-pervading tenderness, universal sympathy, and underlying light-heartedness - "contented wi' little and cantie wi' mair". Wordsworth's theory of common things in common language was never more completely worked out, not even in his own poetry, than in the poetry of Burns. This is perfectly natural, since no other poet of the time was so intimately familiar with common life nor so much a master of common language. His complete naturalness of inspiration and presentation make Burns the living embodiment of the romantic ideal. More than any other poet of his day he was an absolute rebel against all the conventions of neo-classicism - in language, form, subject-matter, and manner of treatment. Comment upon his language is unnecessary, since whatever might be said is perfectly obvious. In the forms he used he often achieved a classic (not nec-classic) perfection. It is in his subject-matter and attitude

1. Crabbe, "The Village," lines 66-68

2. Crabbe, "Tales" X, lines 118, 128



toward it that we find the real Burns. His sympathy for nature embraced the mountain daisy, the field mouse, the old farmer's mare, the cattle in a winter's storm. His love of man knew no bounds - Tam O'Shanter, the cotter's family, the Jolly Beggars, the revellers at "The Holy Fair", John Anderson, even "auld Nickie-ben" - all very real, flesh and blood people. A far cry, these, from Pope's "conscious swain". Small, homely details in nature and in the life of man; mankind reverent, drunken, gay, or repentant: and all of life from a mountain daisy to the devil himself were not too large to be encompassed by his all-embracing sympathy.

Like Burns, Goldsmith was prepared by his life and his attitude toward life to be a romanticist. It is therefore not surprising that, despite his theoretical agreement with classicism, his literary activities show considerable romantic inclination. Among his poetry, "The Traveller" is prophetic of the later Byron's broodings; some of this is also in "The Deserted Village" - "In all my wanderings round this world of care."<sup>1</sup> This latter poem comes most prominently to mind as exemplifying earlier romantic characteristics: celebration of joys of country life, now past; frequent use of homely detail in description; sentimentalized, sympathetic characterization of village types; regret at the encroachment of

1. Goldsmith, "The Desereted Village", l. 83.



wealth and capitalism upon the simpler life.

Unlike any of the other romantics, Blake may be classed as one of them largely because of his individuality. His longer, less comprehensible works show the influence of the mediaeval and Celtic interests of the time. All his work is characterized by mysticism, a less intricate example of which is "A Poison Tree". An understanding of, and fellow-feeling for, everything in nature is seen in such poems as "The Sick Rose" and "The Clod and the Pebble". "The Little Black Boy" exemplifies his breadth of human sympathy. Blake's treatment of animate and inanimate nature and of various types of humanity is individualized by his childlike ability to become the thing he portrays, be it pebble or little black boy.

The foregoing rapid review of the progress of romanticism from James Thomson to the end of the eighteenth century shows a wide range of possibilities within its scope. Diction includes Collins' "bright-haired sun" and Burns's "reamin swats"... Novelty in form is rare and relatively insignificant. Subject-matter ranges from Celtic and mediaeval enthusiasm, through the gothic picturesque, to treatments of nature in the large and in detail, and to considerations of man in his daily living. This treatment of man is colored by melancholy over his plight and democratic doctrines suggesting the remedy, with considerable emphasis on the values of rural life.



Almost completely separated from this stream of thought, and yet almost completely identical with its development are the experiences of the life of William Cowper. From his own testimony we know how negligible was his contact with the poets of his day. In a letter to William Unwin, November 24, 1881, he writes "I have not read an English poet these thirteen years, and but one these twenty years," and again in 1883, "Poetry, English poetry, I never touch," (undated letter to Joseph Hill).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, by the time he came to write poetry he had lived the theories of the romanticists: madness from the futility of the city's gay round; retirement to the country: re-awakening of interest in life through enjoyment of nature, humble life, religion, and the love of man. All of this contributed to his emphasis on simplicity in diction, form, matter, and manner.

Had life also placed Cowper in an environment similar to that of Burns, he might well have produced similar poetry. But a tradition of genteel culture kept a flavor in his work which could move Hazlitt to call him effeminate and to say, "He shakes hands with nature with

1. Of this circumstance Sainte-Beuve writes - "C'est ainsi qu'en se créant tout à fait à lui-même un style selon ses pensées et une forme en accord avec le fond, ce solitaire sensible et maladif, ingénieux et pénétrant, a été l'un des pères du réveil de la poésie anglaise." Sainte-Beuve, C.A., "Profils Anglais", Dent, 1911, p. 235



a pair of fashionable gloves on."<sup>1</sup> Add to his social background an education in the strictest classic tradition, and the result is a combination sufficient to furnish a practically even balance against his romantic tendencies. We have, therefore, in Cowper's poetry a body of material which I consider to represent as no other poetry does the middle ground between genuine classicism (not neo-classicism) and the absolute in romanticism. This very evenness of balance detracts from any possible sparkle but at the same time produces a uniquely satisfactory laboratory specimen for the study of romanticism at the half-way mark.<sup>2</sup>

A continuation of the comparison with Burns will show that despite the air of gentility which pervades Cowper's works there is in the work of the two poets a basic oneness - universal sympathy. Burns saddened for the mountain daisy overturned, sympathized with the dispossessed field mouse, and offered a cup of good cheer to the weary mortal. He saw himself as a companion of the flowers, the animals, and any unfortunate men;

1. Hazlitt, Wm., "Lectures on English Poets", pp. 91-2

2. This concept of the half-way mark between classicism and romanticism is not to be confused with the combination of classicism and romanticism in Shakespeare. The former designates a point in progress; the latter analyzes a poetic product.



his sympathy for them was expressed in his offering them such consolation as he had been able to give himself in similar unavoidable situations. On the other hand, Cowper's sadness for the winter death of nature led him to offer his hot-house as a shelter to many blooms; his sympathy for the hunted hare made him delight to provide protection and comfort for Fuss, Tiny, and Bess;<sup>1</sup> and his broad humanitarian sympathy urged him to encourage remedies for the ills of mankind. He saw himself as one who was protected by the kindness of others from the harshness of the world, and so his universal sympathy provided shelter for helpless wild things and extended to all mankind the shelter of divine love.<sup>2</sup>

In matters of form Cowper was not an innovator. In his earlier work, he used the neo-classic couplet for his longer poems, often producing sententious bits worthy of Pope in their satiric clarity -

Words learned by rote a parrot may rehearse,  
But talking is not always to converse.<sup>3</sup>

Later his longer poems were written in blank verse, which he felt to have been superbly handled by his poetic idol, Milton.

1. Of the hares Sainte-Beuve writes - "Timide lui-même et si sujet à la terreur, Cowper faisait de ces animaux à lui un rapprochement natural . . ." op.cit., p. 211

2. Cf. "The Garden", ll. 108-133, "I was a stricken deer, etc."

3. Cowper, "Conversation", lines 7,8.



While recommending simplicity in diction, and condemning polish, he often deviated in his own poetry from the "natural diction" which Coleridge ascribed to him;<sup>1</sup> tobacco was "the fragrant charge of a short tube", barn-yard fowl were termed "the feather'd tribes domestic", not to mention the occurrence of such neo-augustine characters as the ladies under the title of "the fair" or the farm hand as the "swain". On the other hand, ordinary words were elevated without ornament to lofty poetic positions, witness such titles as "The Task" with such sub-divisions as "The Sofa" and "The Time-piece". Any simple detail of the daily round was grist for his poetic mill, and the inclusion of such detail often meant the use of homely words which his neo-classic predecessors would have branded "low".

Such "low" terms frequently occur in his nature poetry. In "The Garden" he omits no word, however prosaic, necessary to a full description of the processes of cultivation. Here as throughout his writing there is joy in shelter; in winter the plants in his hot-house

Sleep through their polished foliage at the storm  
And seem to smile at what they need not fear.<sup>2</sup>

1. Coleridge, S.T., "Biographia Literaria", Everyman ed., 1930, p. 13

2. Cowper, "The Garden", lines 574-5



But his joy in nature, which he takes pains to indicate as genuine,<sup>1</sup> was by no means confined within the limits of his own garden. The portions of "The Sofa" which describe the country walk include typical examples of his description of sights and sounds which he enjoyed - streams, meadows, woods, sheep grazing. "The Winter Morning Walk" and "The Winter Walk at Noon" abound in further descriptions; the description of the frozen water-fall at the mill wheel<sup>2</sup> or the winter landscape at noon.<sup>3</sup>

In his treatments of nature, small animals and birds were ever prominent. A number of these besides the three famous hares were sheltered in his home. In "The Winter Morning Walk" he includes the foddering of cattle;<sup>4</sup> the woodman's dog, "half lurcher and half cur," is included with a description of his antics in the snow;<sup>5</sup> the redbreast after the snow storm is described flitting "from spray to spray" and shaking down "the

1. "Thou knowest my praise of nature most sincere,  
And that my raptures are not conjured up  
To serve occasions of poetic pomp,  
But genuine . . . ." ("The Sofa", ll. 150-153)
2. Cowper, "The Winter Morning Walk", ll. 101-168
3. Cowper, "The Winter Walk at Noon", ll. 57-85
4. Cowper, "The Winter Morning Walk, ll. 27-40
5. Ibid., ll. 45-51



pendant drops of ice";<sup>1</sup> the feeding of "the feathered tribes domestic" is presented with gentle humor.<sup>2</sup> Such a picture of domestic security leads Cowper to wonder about the wild birds, and to sadden as he thinks how winter's scarcity of food "thins all their numerous flocks".<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere he condemns the hunter's cruelty and vividly pictures a poor wounded wild creature.

That Cowper's impressions from nature were not merely pictorial is frequently evident in his comments. He not only describes what he sees, but he lets his imagination play around the familiar object and "gives the charm of novelty to things of every day".<sup>4</sup> This is admirably exemplified in his imaginary review of the development of "Yardley Oak" from the acorn to its ancient gnarled form - a flight of the imagination which he follows with a challenge to mere literal minds:

Disprove it, if ye can,  
Ye reasoners broad awake, whose busy search  
Of argument, employed too oft amiss,  
Sifts half the pleasures of short life away!<sup>5</sup>

1. Cowper, "Winter Walk at Noon", ll. 77-82

2. Cowper, "Winter Morning Walk", ll. 58-76

3. Ibid., ll. 77-88

4. Coleridge's statement of Wordsworth's purpose, "Biographia Literaria", p.

5. Cowper, "Yardley Oak", ll. 29-32. Cf. also on the oak, "The Sofa", lines 377-384. Also Wordsworth in his preface to Lyrical Ballads - "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge."



His view of nature as the Creator's cure for human ills  
is implicit throughout his work.<sup>1</sup> Something approximating a statement of Cowper's philosophy of nature in its relation to man grew out of his enjoyment of the quiet of sylvan solitude:

Meditation here  
May think down hours to moments. Here the heart  
May give a useful lesson to the head,  
And learning wiser grow without his books.<sup>2</sup>

One is reminded of Blake's "To see . . . eternity in an hour", or of Wordsworth's "Knowing that Nature never did betray the heart that loved her".

Toward man Cowper's sympathy was as broad as toward nature, but his ability to express it was hampered by his social environment. Much as his heart went out to all humanity, he was not one of them as Burns was. So we find him speaking, for example, of the woodman - for whom he had the warmest feeling - as a "sturdy churl", and of the farm-hand as a "slow-paced swain". His description of the thresher at work reveals the limiting environment from which he saw these laborers; his comment displays an understanding of their joys and weariness as old as poetry and as new as "social security". Cowper

1. e.g. "Retirement," lines 187-214

2. Cowper, "Winter Walk at Noon", ll. 84-87



and his friends, probably ladies, are walking among the groves of the Throckmorton estate, when they see the thresher at work in the distance. A vivid description of his labors is followed by the comment:

Come hither, ye that press your beds of down,  
 And sleep not; see him sweating o'er his bread  
 Before he eats it. - 'Tis the primal curse,  
 But softened into mercy; made the pledge      1.  
 Of cheerful days, and nights without a groan.

His closest contact with the humble was in church service. There his evangelical enthusiasm made him one of them, and when he saw them as souls he wrote of them with clearer understanding. Many of his hymns attest this:

For Thou, within no walls confined,  
 Inhabitest the humble mind;  
 Such ever brings thee where they come,  
 And going, takes what he doth more.

Man and nature were both manifestations of, and objects of, divine love; as such they appealed to Cowper as subjects for sympathetic reflection and for poetry.

That poetry occasionally gave utterance to his wider humanitarian interests. Their broadest expression

1. Cowper, "The Sofa", lines 362-366. Cf. Shakespeare in "Henry V", Act IV, sc. i, lines 215-269, and Thomas Dekker's "Art thou poor, yet hast thou golden slumbers?  
 Oh, Sweet content!"



is perhaps -

How then should I and any man that lives  
Be strangers to each other?<sup>1</sup>

Such a sense of brotherhood underlies his conception of the sentiments of Alexander Selkirk, who, though he could proclaim, "I am monarch of all I survey", felt himself so lost when "out of humanities reach" that he added:

Better dwell in the midst of alarms,  
Than reign in this horrible place<sup>2</sup>.

Naturally his humanitarian principles when combined with his evangelical evaluation of the human soul made him an ardent agitator against slavery; witness "The Negro's Complaint" and "Pity for Poor Africans", in the latter of which he uses the satire which he employed so effectively whenever he was deeply aroused. More immediate to his environment are his pathetic description of Crazy Kate, a local character,<sup>3</sup> and his picture of the gypsies<sup>4</sup> - so different in feeling from Crabbe's picture. For although Cowper sees the sordidness of their existence he sees also its healthful possibilities and

1. Cowper, "The Garden", lines 200-201

2. Cowper, "Verses: Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk during his solitary abode on the island of Juan Fernandez," lines 7, 8.

3. Cowper, "The Sofa", ll. 534-556

4. Ibid., ll. 557-591



almost envies the gaiety of these "houseless rovers of the sylvan world".

Frequent objects of his humanitarian regard were those deluded souls who for any reason, serious or frivolous, spent their time among the city's restless crowds instead of seeking "the refuge of some rural shade". His solution of the question of country versus town is summed up in his statement - "God made the country, and man made the town,"<sup>1</sup> which is followed by comparison of country joys with those of the city, showing the superiority of the former. Several passages in "The Garden" condemn the city, a smoky place where "metropolitan volcanoes . . . whose Stygian throats breathe darkness all day long,"<sup>2</sup> and "the stir of Commerce . . . thundering loud"<sup>3</sup> give atmosphere to that wicked place "spotted with all crimes".<sup>4</sup> These cities, "humming with a restless crowd",<sup>5</sup> are repulsive to him even in their gayer moods; the man who "sweats in the crowded theatre",<sup>6</sup> or the one who "patient stands till

1. Cowper, "The Sofa", l. #49
2. Cowper, "The Garden", ll. 737-8
3. Ibid., ll. 739-40
4. Ibid., l. 837
5. Cowper, "Retirement", l. 21
6. Cowper, "Winter Evening", l. 43



his feet throb<sup>1</sup>" listening to some speech, are hardly to be envied when viewed from a rural solitude. For in that rural solitude he finds "health, leisure, means to improve it, friendship, peace"<sup>2</sup>, and so asks "What could I wish that I possess not here?"<sup>2</sup> This retreat brings him shelter, when the fire has been stirred, the shutters closed fast, and the curtains drawn.

In a later poem, "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture", Cowper shows an increased simplicity in diction and comes nearer to the feeling of some of the other romantics, since here the domestic scenes he portrays are, like those in Burns and Goldsmith for example, nostalgic memories of happy childhood. To be sure the detail is that of a country parsonage rather than a laborer's cottage, but the homely items of the daily round are as new in poetry, though it be the routine of a genteel household. No neo-classicist would have celebrated in verse the little wagon in which the gardener drew him to school, nor his scarlet mantle or velvet cap. No one before Cowper had poetized the "nightly visits" of his mother to see if he were "safe and warmly laid" to say nothing of -

Thy morning bounties ere I left my home,  
The biscuit, or confectionary plum;

1. Cowper, "The Winter Evening", l. 46

2. Cowper, "The Garden", ll. 690-1



The fragrant waters on my cheeks bestow'd  
 By thy own hand, till fresh they shone and glow'd<sup>1</sup>  
 Imagine either Pope or Dryden writing couplets on having  
 his face washed!

Here we find no conventional pastoral scenes for the delectation of the urbane, but the small details of retired life presented by one who knows and loves them. Nor do we have man as a remote concept. To be sure we do not feel the callouses on his hands nor see the dirt of toil on his boots, but we know him for a warm, human soul, a child of God more valued in His eyes than the most lordly sinner. Here Cowper has shown his love of men to be one with the humanitarian doctrine underlying romanticism, and his love of nature to be real and all-inclusive, encompassing the most significant principles of romanticism - nature as refuge, friend, companion, inspirer.

So it is evident that Cowper expresses in his poetry the main streams of romanticism in style and thought, conditioned by his experience. The gothic, Celtic, and mediaeval - incidental elements - find no place in his writing. His devotion to simplicity is colored by some of the classical niceties of gentility; his love of nature is deep and meaningful even though evidently that

1. Cowper, "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture", ll. 60-63



of a "gentleman"; his love of man has "the wideness of God's mercy" but is expressed in the language of one whose social position makes him appear to be rather philanthropist than companion in misfortune. His poetry proves him to be a classical romanticist.

Expressing as he did in these poems the spontaneous up-wellings of his spirit, recorded and embellished with no more ambitious purpose at the outset than he proposed in planting roses or trimming vines, it is natural that Cowper should have a rather casual attitude toward criticism. Only so far as his views concerned his humanitarian interests was he anxious that the world in general agree with him. His criticism is therefore, in the main, delightfully un-militant, by-the-way, and privately conversational.



## II

DIFFICULTIES IN FORMING AN ESTIMATE OF COWPER AS A  
CRITIC

If Cowper been as conscious of his public and as concerned about the preservation of his opinions for future generations as were such well known critics as Dryden, Addison, Pope, or Johnson, he might not have left his opinions so scattered among his letters, poetry, prefaces, essays, and random notes. However, as was the case with so many other affairs which might have been termed practical, Cowper left the systematic arrangement to some one else; and nearly one hundred and fifty years have passed before the attempt has been made. Whether or not Cowper's lack of personal concern in the matter is an advantage is a debatable question. The absolute spontaneity of most of the critical statements is a guarantee of the genuine conviction behind them; on the other hand the same spontaneity makes for lack of careful consideration of all sides of a question before expressing an opinion. One is therefore occasionally confronted with discrepancies between Cowper's contemporarily published opinions and his private opinions later brought to light in the publication of his letters.



These letters, which he by no means expected to come before the public eye, contain by far the larger portion of Cowper's criticism. He felt perfectly free in them to be inconsistent, unorthodox, over-condemnatory, or too kind - in fact, to commit any of the critical errors from which such a public-conscious mind as Pope's would have shrunk in horror. To one who knows something of Cowper's views of Pope, nothing can be more intriguing than such a promise concerning Cowper's opinion of him as - "to you, my dear, I can utter my mind freely."<sup>1</sup> The published prefaces and essays on Pope make it possible to work out a middle ground between what Cowper would write for publication and what he would reserve for private reading.

In the case of much of his other criticism no such basis for considered judgment is available. In his letters to his friends concerning their own work one would expect him to be prejudiced in their favor. Lady Hesketh's letters he declares to be "the best in the world,"<sup>2</sup> not in the least inferior to those of the famed Mrs. Montagu, which he praises highly. The style of John Newton's *Ecclesiastical History* Cowper judges to be "incomparably better than that of Robertson or Gibbon"<sup>3</sup>

1. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785

2. To Lady Hesketh, May 22, 1786

3. To John Newton, June 13, 1785



this of course in a letter to John Newton. Even to Walter Churcley, whose poetry he could not think well of, he was loathe to give any adverse criticism. He writes to Lady Hesketh of his difficulty, "I was really unwilling to mortify a brother bard, and yet could not avoid it but at the expense of common honesty."<sup>1</sup>

Letters to friends concerning the work of friends allowed him to give full rein to his enthusiasm. In letters to Lady Hesketh no praise was too lavish when bestowed upon her famous friends Mrs. Montagu and Hannah More. "I no longer wonder that Mrs. Montagu stands at the head of all that is called learned"<sup>2</sup> is followed by enthusiastic and specific praise of the merits of her "Essay on the Genius of Shakespeare". Hannah More's verse he admired as "neatly executed and handsomely turned"<sup>3</sup> and frequently commended her work, in numerous letters to Lady Hesketh. In praising the work of "Vinny" Bourne,<sup>4</sup> or of Charles Churchill<sup>5</sup> his affection for them personally strongly colors his opinions, a fact which he makes no effort to conceal from his correspondent.

When the correspondent had presented some book to him, his critical opinion of the work as expressed in a

1. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 24, 1786
2. To Lady Hesketh, May 27, 1788
3. To Lady Hesketh, Apr. 26, 1792
4. To Wm. Unwin, Mar. 23, 1781
5. To Wm. Unwin, n.d.



letter to the donor was naturally colored by a sense of obligation. To Samuel Rose,<sup>1</sup> who had presented him with a copy of Burns's poems, his condemnation of the language of them was rather gentler than in a later letter to Lady Hesketh.<sup>2</sup>

When no gratitude to a donor curbed his expression of displeasure, letters afforded him glorious opportunity to condemn as heartily as he wished any books or writers which displeased him. Any adverse criticism of his idol Milton roused him to fury. He forgot his gentle reserve and threatened, "I would beat Warton if he were living . . ."<sup>3</sup> when Warton wrote of Milton as narrow minded. A similar pugilistic impulse overcame him when he read Johnson's Life of Milton - "Oh! I could thrash his old jacket, till I made his pension jingle in his pocket."<sup>4</sup>

Let it not be supposed, however, that Cowper was so over-partisan in these letters as to be completely regardless of merit where he blamed or of faults where he praised. Despite the fact that he found in the lectures of Hugh Blair evidence that the lecturer had "such a brain as Shakespeare somewhere describes as 'dry as the remainder biscuit after a voyage'", he is none the less willing to adjudge him "a sensible man, master of his subject, and

1. To Samuel Rose, July 24, 1787, and Aug. 27, 1787

2. To Lady Hesketh, Apr. 12, 1788

3. To Walter Bagot, Oct. 25, 1791

4. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779



. . . a good writer . . ." <sup>1</sup> And although William Hayley was as dear to him as a brother, Cowper's praise of his Poems and Plays even in a letter Hayley himself did not exceed such a mild statement as "I was greatly struck with the evident facility with which they were written." <sup>2</sup>

Whereas in the letters one feels that some allowance should be made for possible excess feeling Cowper may have permitted himself in such a private expression, oddly enough a similar allowance is perhaps necessary in the case of his public utterances -- that is, when those utterances are in the form of poetry. Hoffmann in his references to Cowper's poetry as source material seems not to have taken into consideration the fact that the style is naturally heightened for the occasion. When he writes of John Bunyan -

Ingenious dreamer, in whose well-told tale  
Sweet fiction and sweet truth alike prevail<sup>3</sup>  
we find little of which to complain unless it be that the language is rather too pretty for its Puritan subject-matter. But when he writes of Addison's "sublimity" in Table Talk (l. 644), although his letters have never expressed for him any elaborate praise, one feels that some consideration must be given to determining how much of the praise is poetic flight and how much genuine. That his

1. To Wm. Unwin., Apr. 5, 1784

2. To Wm. Hayley, Apr. 15, 1792

3. Cowper, "Tirocinium, ll. 134-5



blame of Chesterfield as "Grey-beard corrupter of our listening youth"<sup>1</sup> is genuine even if poetic one does not question.

In his other contemporarily published works, the prefaces and essays, we find his most carefully considered opinions. These opinions have been trimmed for the public eye. As Cowper once wrote, "It would ill become me avowedly to point out the faults of Pope in a preface, and would be as impolitic as indecent."<sup>2</sup> An occasional essay for the Gentleman's Magazine is rather less reserved than the prefaces. These published items furnish a useful balance in the final evaluation of Cowper's judgment of Pope, Homer, and translation.

No consideration of circumstances of expression is necessary when one considers any general, constructive criticism - the formulation of general principles, entirely free from personalities. Advice as to style and form, constructive criticism of the major literary types, and miscellaneous suggestions for composition abound in his writings. These are valid, consistent, and altogether worthwhile no matter where they are found.

It is therefore safe to say that, whether meant

1. Cowper, "The Progress of Error", l. 342

2. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785



to be public or not, any expressions of the basic principles of Cowper's critical thinking are sound and consistent in conception. Such criticism as is concerned with personalities must be carefully weighed in the light of whether or not it was meant for publication and whether or not it was expressed in poetic form.



## III

## COWPER'S OPINIONS ON CRITICISM

Having himself retired to the quiet of the country that he might escape the maddening bustle of the city, Cowper does not surprise one in his desire to remain aloof from the critical controversies of his day. In the field of criticism as in other fields, "modern" times were beginning in the eighteenth century. And in the field of criticism those innovations one may term "modern" were not commendable. A realm of scholarship which had challenged the minds of great thinkers from Longinus and Aristotle down through the centuries - which had been devoted to the evolution and organization of valid, basic literary principles - was so fallen on evil days as to be repulsive to the mind of one so sensitive as Cowper. Neo-classicists, over-proud of their understanding of classic principles, had so delighted in conformity that strongly original minds rebelled against the emptiness and lack of robustness in their productions. Each side of the controversy went to excess in condemnation of the other, until anyone who had a mean tongue could jump on the literary band-wagon and hurl empty invectives at whichever side paid the most. Coleridge rightly termed the period



"this age of personality, this age of literary and political gossiping."<sup>1</sup>

Cowper was by no means free from any strong feelings on the political, religious, and literary controversies of his day, but his aversion to any kind of publicity made him shrink from joining the fray. Moreover, his initial interest in writing had been purely for the sake of diversion; the only literary task he really enjoyed was one with no heavier a compulsion than a request from Lady Austen. Only his idolization of Milton combined with his sense of a religious mission could induce him to undertake the editing of Milton's works. For it was Cowper's conviction that Milton's "two principal poems are of a kind that call for an editor who believes the Gospel and is well grounded in all Evangelical doctrine."<sup>2</sup> But the work was never completed. Any criticism done merely to evaluate the work of mediocre contemporary authors had no charms for him. To oblige his book seller he undertook some work of this nature. But, as we have previously noted (p.36) he was "unwilling to mortify a brother bard,"<sup>3</sup> and so, where he could not praise, he found the work unpleasant.

1. Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria" footnote, p. 22

2. To John Newton, Feb. 20, 1792

3. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 24, 1786



The critic's task is not a pleasant one, unless he can find something to commend; and it has not yet been my fortune to stumble on an opportunity of much encomium.<sup>1</sup>

Only in private letters did he really enjoy criticism. There he could condemn at will with no fear of doing public injury to anyone, and likewise he could praise where he wished with no concern as to his own reputation for critical acumen. Fortunate it is for us that this is true, else we should have been denied the opinions of one who was in many ways well qualified for unprejudiced criticism, especially in his particular day and age.

The very fact that much of Cowper's criticism is found in his letters establishes him as a convincing example of the validity of his own theory that the best critic is one who reads for pleasure:

The same work will wear a different appearance in the eyes of the same man, according to the different views with which he reads it; if merely for his amusement, his candour being in less danger of a twist from interest or prejudice, he is pleased with what is really pleasing, and is not over curious to discover a blemish, because the exercise of a minute exactness is not consistent with his purpose. But if he once becomes a critic by trade, the case is altered.<sup>2</sup>

Even were the critic inclined to praise, his decision

1. to Samuel Rose, Jan. 19, 1789

2. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 17, 1782



would still be less lively and stimulating if he treated the work in hand from the viewpoint of a critical laboratory. A botanist may tell me why a rose is red, and an aestheticist may explain why its contours appeal to my sense of the beautiful, but I need neither to reason me into admiring it - understanding is not appreciation. So Cowper finds no appeal in the critic whose praise is based on knowledge of the proper thing rather than on enthusiasm for the irresistible.

I take him to be a critic very little animated by what he reads, who rather reasons about the beauties of an author, than really tastes them; and who finds that a passage is praiseworthy, not because it charms him, but because it is accommodated to the laws of criticism in that case made and provided.<sup>1</sup>

Again, as a creative writer Cowper validates his own theory of what a critic should be, for in his opinion, one who could the more readily use individual taste as a criterion for judgment might well be the creative writer. Critical controversy has for centuries treated this question. There have been those who demanded that the critic have himself done the sort of work which he presumed to criticize. Cowper does not ask this, but a consistent item in such a system as his would naturally be his preference for the creative writer as critic, for such a writer could trust

1. To Wm. Unwin, Apr. 5, 1784



to the validity of his own appreciative judgment rather than commending or condemning according to "the laws of criticism in that case made and provided".<sup>1</sup> Characteristically enough this preference in Cowper is with a view to kinder treatment of the work criticized:

But we who make Books ourselves are more merciful to Bookmakers. I would that every fastidious judge of authors, were, himself, obliged to write; there goes more to the compilation of a volume than many Critics imagine.<sup>2</sup>

But such a result was not evident in the criticism of the eighteenth century creative writers who disagreed so frequently, loudly, and unpleasantly with each other. Cowper was particularly distressed by the abusive criticism for which Pope, himself so sensitive, was all too famous, and found him the "less pardonable too, because experienced in all the difficulties of composition. . . . Alas for Pope, if the mercy he showed to others was the measure of the mercy he received."<sup>2</sup>

Circumstances deprived Pope of the breadth in point of view necessary for the best critic. This qualification is nowhere mentioned by Cowper as necessary in a critic, although in literary matters he possessed it to a considerable degree. He could commend the accomplishments of

1. to Wm. Unwin, ABr. 5, 1784

2. To Samuel Rose, Aug. 8, 1789



many with whose general methods and principles he disagreed, notably Pope and Johnson. He would make a conscientious effort to appreciate something entirely new, as in the case of the poetry of Burns, realizing its merits although too conservative to commend its novelty. But Cowper's criticism suffered at times from the same malady that infected so much of the literary criticism of his day - he was not always able to separate his literary viewpoints from his social, political, and religious convictions. That there could be any good in the aristocratic Lord Chesterfield he would soundly deny, for such corrupt subject-matter as his could never be ever-looked no matter what the grace of presentation. His religious and political differences with Dr. Johnson really did much to excite his resentment toward that Church of England Tory's literary pronouncements. In the realm of politics, this seems to have been an influence of which Cowper was quite unconscious. When, for the good doctor's treatment of the Puritan Wilton, Cowper wants to make his pension jingle in his pocket he seems unaware that his mode of reference to that pension is indicative of his prejudice against the doctor's being so situated politically as to secure it. Nor is he, perhaps, conscious of the color his own prejudice gives to a more specific statement of his quarrel with Johnson:



A pensioner is not likely to spare a republican; and the Doctor, in order, I suppose, to convince his royal patron of the sincerity of his monarchical principles, has belaboured that great poet's character with the most industrious cruelty.<sup>1</sup>

His religious differences with the doctor he was more open in expressing, some of his remarks on the matter being truly unkind. Nothing is so calculated to focus the mind to a point of invalid certainty as religious prejudice. One is not surprised that it is in letters to John Newton that Cowper expressed his most unkind censures of Johnson's religious outlook. In discussing Johnson's opinion that no poet has yet been successful with divine subjects, Cowper writes, "A little more Christian knowledge and Experience would perhaps enable him to discover excellent poetry on spiritual themes".<sup>2</sup> Even more unkind, and entirely unnecessary, is Cowper's opinion that Johnson's devotional activities were ridiculous. "His prayers for the Dead, and his minute account of the rigour with which he observed Church Feasts" seem to Cowper "a melancholy witness to testify how much of the wisdom of this world may consist with almost infantine ignorance of the affairs of a better".<sup>3</sup> One can only conjecture whether Cowper's omission of any mention of a critic's need for breadth of vision was the

1. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779

2. To John Newton, Oct. 4, 1781

3. To John Newton, May 22, 1784



result of knowledge of his own errors in narrowness of viewpoint or the result of such ignorance of that narrowness as would lead him to suppose his views unbiased.

As he was certain of the validity of his religious beliefs, even when they prophesied his own damnation, so was he certain of that in literature which he accepted as valid. In fact he took no interest in the so-called higher criticism which sought to question the classical verities or to clarify for "modern" readers what a Homer or a Milton had made clear beyond the power of smaller minds to elucidate. Such investigations he respected no more than he did the scientific search for knowledge so popular in his day. His comparison of such knowledge with true wisdom is expressed in some of his most clever aphoristic verse. One can hardly forebear the quotation of at least one example:

Knowledge dwells  
In heads replete with thoughts of other men,  
Wisdom in minds attentive to their own<sup>1</sup>

Such a search for knowledge he sees as having misled the leaders in the Homeric controversy to the unwise decision that Homer did not write his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. His ironic treatment of the controversy concludes,

1. Cowper, "The Winter Walk at Noon", ll 89-91



I suppose that it were in vain for an honest plain man to enquire, if Homer did not write the Iliad and Odyssey, who did? The answer would undoubtedly be - It is no matter. He <sup>1</sup> did not, which is all that I undertook to prove.

When his friend James Hurdis submitted for approval his arrangement of Shakespeare's plays, Cowper disavowed any competency to judge in such matters. Had Hurdis not been a young friend whom Cowper wished to encourage, he would probably have admitted that the subject did not interest him in the least. Specialists in elaborate systems of internal, higher criticism would have smiled condescendingly at Cowper's simple statement:

Where other data are wanting to ascertain the time when an author of many pieces wrote each in particular, there can be no better criterion by which to determine the point, than the more or less proficiency manifested in the composition. <sup>2</sup>

All such treatments as the above-mentioned Homeric and Shakespearian discourses he felt to be essentially useless.

"Defend me therefore, common sense," say I,  
 "From reveries so airy, from the toil  
 Of dropping buckets into empty wells,  
 And growing old in drawing nothing up!" <sup>3</sup>

But, although he had no interest in higher criticism, he was vitally concerned with such phases of critical thinking as he considered sound. Many of his sentiments

1. To John Newton, Nov. 5, 1785

2. To James Hurdis, Mar. 23, 1792

3. Cowper, "The Garden", ll. 187-190



on criticism in general are so similar to those of the novelists Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne and to those of the poet Coleridge that one wonders if their similar pronouncements represent a familiarity with each other's writings or a natural correspondence in taste. All the above-mentioned were in revolt against criticism of the neo-classic type, and especially against criticism for its own sake. Typical of their attitude is Cowper's statement of his conception of the critic's place, his "raison d'être", and his errors in conceiving the scope of his work.

Critics did not originally beget Authors, but Authors made Critics. Common sense dictated to Writers the necessity of Method, connexion, and thoughts congruous to the nature of their subject. Genius prompted them with embellishments, and then came the Critics. observing the good effects of an attention to these items, they enacted laws for the observance of them in time to come; and having drawn their rules for good writing from what was actually well written, boasted themselves the inventors of an Art, which yet the Authors of the day had already exemplified.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the errors of this "snarling generation"<sup>2</sup>, "they are not all equally worthy of the lash. There are among them men of real learning, judgment and candour."<sup>3</sup> Cowper had a sound understanding of their value to an

1. To John Newton, Apr. 26, 1784
2. To John Johnson, Mar. 25, 1790
3. To Thomas Park, Apr. 27, 1792



author and a real respect for such of their contributions as he knew to be helpful. Despite his strong feeling against rules, Cowper was no mere romantic radical who would break away from all traditional forms and types of expression. In fact, he felt that those all too numerous writers who had taken the need for literary liberty to be an excuse for scribbling license might well profit from the work of the critics. For the chief usefulness of these critics was in "giving us at one view a Map of the boundaries which propriety sets to fancy, and serving as judges to whom the public may at once appeal when pestered with the vagaries of those who have had the hardiness to transgress them."<sup>1</sup>

Cowper's avowed aim in his writing was to please the public.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he believed that such should be every author's aim and that he should therefore take advantage of any indication of public taste which the critic could give him.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this point he would make no concession to the critics. If he felt sure of his ground, any adverse criticism he characterized as "a flimsy criticism, and proves nothing so clearly as the malevolence and insufficiency of its author."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, when his critic

1. To John Newton, Apr. 26, 1784

2. "when I write for the public I write of course with a desire to please" (to Charlotte Smith, July 25, 1793)

3. "An author should consider himself as bound not to please himself but the Public; and so far as the good pleasure of the Public may be learn'd from the Critics, I design to accommodate myself to it." (to Joseph Hill, Mar. 29, 1793)

4. To Samuel Teedon, 1792



appears to be "rigorous enough indeed, but a scholar, and a man of sense"<sup>1</sup> who does not intend mischief, he is grateful for any suggested improvements and willing to make changes to conform with such suggestions.

The critic's aid to the author in setting bounds to his genius and in understanding his public seemed more commendable to Cowper than the critic's attempt to interpret the author to the public. It was in this phase of his work that the critic erred most frequently in arrogance of manner, narrowness of viewpoint, and pure sins of disposition. One is again reminded of Coleridge in Cowper's treatment of the requirements for a critic and the frequent deviation of the professional critic from these requirements. Cowper is first concerned with the critic's desire to display such nicety of taste that he sees flaws in what is generally commended in his day. In our own day, to be sure, one does not expect or wish T. S. Eliot to find profundity and poetic beauty in Edgar Guest, merely because he has a following in the general public. On the other hand, when Robert Frost produces some gem of aptness, one is annoyed, to say the least, by the professional critics' meagre regard for his worth simply because his work has a wide appeal. The true critic must recognize the distinction between an appeal based on

1. To Samuel Rose, Feb. 17, 1793



catering to popular, ephemeral sentimentality and an appeal based on a perception of universal values. The critic who, lacking such power of recognition, condemns a work merely because the public commend it, is the subject of a tirade from Cowper - given piquant flavor by a dash of sarcasm.

He must then at any rate establish, if he can, an opinion in every mind of his uncommon discernment, and his exquisite taste. This great end he can never accomplish by thinking in the track that has been beaten under the hoof of public judgment. He must endeavour to convince the world that their favourite authors have more faults than they are aware of, and such as they have never suspected. Having marked out a writer universally esteemed, whom he finds it for that very reason convenient to deprecate and traduce, he will overlook some of his beauties, he will faintly praise others, and in such a manner as to make thousands, more modest, though quite as judicious as himself, question whether they are beauties at all.<sup>1</sup>

To Cowper's mind, a critic should above all things be willing to admit his error, but the type of critic which Cowper most disliked was notorious for clinging to misconceptions. To gain some idea of the number of these who flourished in his day one has only to consult the names and dates of some of the most fantastic annotations to Shakespeare, (e.g. Lewis Theobald, 1688-1754) The witless nature of some of the misconceptions to which

1. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 17, 1782



such commentators as Bentley clung with the tenacity of  
stupidity furnished Cowper with material for satiric humor.<sup>1</sup>

Through the medium of this humor he makes clear his contempt for the blindness with which these critics cling to their misconstructions, refusing to give attention to conclusive proof of their errors and concerned more with preserving their own reputation than with making a genuine contribution to learning. Very likely a glance at higher

i. "If authors could have lived to adjust and authenticate their own text, a commentator would have been a useless creature. For instance - if Dr. Bentley had found, or opined that he had found, the word tube, where it seemed to present itself to you, and had judged the subject worthy of his critical acumen, he would either have justified the corrupt reading, or have substituted some invention of his own, in defence of which he would have exerted all his polemical abilities, and have quarrelled with half the literati in Europe. Then suppose the writer himself, as in the present case, to interpose with a gentle whisper thus - 'If you look again, Doctor, you will perceive that what appears to you to be "tube", is neither more nor less than the simple monosyllable "ink", but I wrote it in great haste, and the want of sufficient precision in the character has occasioned your mistake: you will be especially satisfied when you see the sense elucidated by this explanation.' But I question whether the doctor would quit his ground, or allow any author to be a competent judge in his own case. The world, however, would acquiesce immediately, and vote the critic useless." (to John Newton, May 10, 1780)



criticism was intended in the following characterization of these erring ones.

When some hypothesis absurd and vain  
Has fill'd with all its fumes a critic's brain,  
The text that sorts not with his darling whim,  
Though plain to others, is obscure to him.

Not only should a critic be willing to admit his error, but he should also be willing to cite proof of his veracity. In requiring this of a critic, Cowper was preceded by Thomas Rymer and loudly seconded by Coleridge. A "particular" criticism of his own work Cowper was willing to accept, but he had no regard for the more general critics even from one whom he considered a scholar - "in his general ones I think he asserts too largely, and more than he could prove."<sup>1</sup> As a general principle of critical procedure he requires the use of extracts:

To censure a book in that general manner is neither just to the author of it, nor satisfactory to their own readers. Extracts should always be given; first, as a proof that they the critics have read what they condemn, and secondly, that the public may judge for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

To one who viewed criticism objectively in that "age of personality", it is not surprising that it should seem necessary to emphasize the critic's obligation to consider the separateness of a man's life from his work. Too many

1. Cowper, "The Progress of Error", ll. 444-447
2. To Samuel Rose, Feb. 17, 1793
3. To Walter Churche, Dec. 24, 1790



instances were available of friends turned enemies and using the knowledge gained from former intimacies to give point to cutting attacks. Pope and Addison were deplorably proficient in this form of literary warfare. Of such practice Cowper writes, "Double Detestation attends the Man who to gratify a present Ennity, avails himself of Secrets he could never have had Possession of had he not once professed himself a Friend . . ." <sup>1</sup> Even when the work under criticism was one which roused him to excited opposition, and even when he knew the writer's private life to be censurable, Cowper labored zealously to prevent other critics of the work from attacking its published errors in doctrine through its author's private errors in conduct.

The Book and the Author are distinct Subjects, and will be for ever accounted such by all reasonable Persons. The Author indeed may Suffer by the Follies of the Book, but the latter ought not be judged by the character of the Writer.<sup>1</sup>

A critic who might possess the above qualities would commend himself most highly to Cowper if he could add to them the ability to make his work interesting and agreeable. That Beattie was able to do this commended him to Cowper's admiration as "the most agreeable and amiable writer I ever met with; the only author I have

1. To J. Newton, Nov. 19, 1781



seen whose critical and philosophical researches are diversified and embellished by a poetical imagination, that makes even the driest subject, and the leanest, a feast for an epicure in books."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the sterility of Blair's fancy branded him "a dry writer, useful no doubt as an instructor, but as little entertaining as with so much knowledge it is possible to be."<sup>1</sup> Such a human, unpretentious evaluation has a natural appeal, but lest Cowper be accused of applying too widely and without discrimination his doctrine of appreciative criticism, it may be well to cite his analysis of the ingredients of Beattie's agreeableness and of Blair's dryness.

I have lately been employed in reading Beattie's and Blair's lectures. the latter I have not yet finished. I find the former the most agreeable of the two. Indeed the most entertaining writer upon dry subjects that I ever met with. his imagination is highly poetical, his language easy and elegant, and his manner so familiar that we seem to be conversing with an old friend upon terms of the most sociable intercourse while we read him. Blair is, on the contrary, rather stiff, not that his stile is pedantic, but that his air is formal. he is a sensible man and understands his subjects, but too conscious that he is addressing the public. and too solicitous about his success, to indulge himself for a moment in that play of fancy which makes the other so agreeable. In Blair we find a Scholar. In Beattie both a scholar and an amiable man.<sup>2</sup>

Viewed in summary, these pronouncements of Cowper's

1. To William Unwin, ABr. 5, 1784
2. To J. Newton, Apr. 16, 1784



show that much of his quarrel was not with criticism in general but largely with certain characteristics of eighteenth century criticism. To recapitulate, he resented the critic's considering himself of prior importance to the author, his feeling himself to be valuable for his own sake, his apparent deliberate variance with universal taste, his stubbornness in clinging to opinions proved erroneous, his audacities in the realm of higher criticism, and his indulgence in unpleasant personalities. Despite Cowper's condemnation of any reference to an author's character, he showed himself to be a man of his century by allowing social, political, and religious prejudices to influence his own critical opinions. His desire that a critic be himself a creative writer had been a frequently recurring item in criticism for some time. His requirement that a critic prove his point by illustrative extracts was a slogan of the later romantics, but had been suggested as early as Rymer.

The phase of his criticism in which Cowper most clearly presents himself as a classical romanticist is in his consideration of the value of rules and judgment by rules. He resents the critic's assumption of credit for having originated the rules of good writing. He has no use for the critic who finds a work commendable, not because it has charmed him, but because "it is accommodated



to the laws of criticism in that case made and provided." Were this all, we should call Cowper an out and out romanticist, and in so far as he is a champion of individual genius against autocratic literary government from without that is true. But that is only one half of the picture. His condemnation of the critic for his emphasis on rules is not a quarrel with the rules but with the critic's use of them. If the critic needs the knowledge of rules as a criterion of literary excellence, then he is lacking in perception. If a critic believes that rules came first and literary excellence resulted from them, then he disregards the accomplishments of those original creative geniuses who first demonstrated as excellent the practices on which the rules are based, and also leaves no room for the appreciation of any new excellence which may charm despite irregularity. This is not a plea for license; it is a demonstration of the theory that rules are from within and no outer formulation or application of them can be valid either for creative writing or for criticism. The rules themselves he presents as necessary and seen to be so - "Common sense dictated to Writers the necessity of method, connexion, and thoughts congruous to the nature of their subject"; a critic is most useful when he points out "the boundaries which propriety sets to fancy"; and anyone who transgresses those boundaries is pestering the public



by his vagaries.

In his opinions on criticism, Cowper is a romanticist in his revolt against the neo-classicist's interpretation of the classics, and a classicist in his own interpretation of what came to be romanticism - therefore, he may well be termed a classical romanticist.



## IV

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR COMPOSITION

Although Cowper declared that he never troubled himself much about "the art of writing and composing", he has given us in various scattered declarations a fairly representative group of opinions and principles regarding composition, both poetic and prose. Considered as a unit they form another composite picture of the classical romanticist.

## Elisions

In the matter of elisions he was in general guided by the taste of his day. However, his admiration for Milton who used them frequently caused him to be somewhat reluctant to condemn them even when so substantial a literary arbiter as Dr. Johnson recommended their elimination. The particle "the" he found to be a very troublesome element in the English language. Although Cowper was no such master of smoothness as Pope, he did resent the difficulties incurred in securing smoothness without the elision of this particle. Besides, "the practice of cutting short a 'The' is warranted by Milton, who of all English poets that ever lived, had certainly the finest ear."<sup>1</sup> Other elisions in Milton recommend themselves to Cowper despite the fact that

1. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 5, 1786



some other wording would be more smooth. For example, of Milton's writing "hollow'abyss" Cowper says:

This is an instance of the fine effect of an elision used judiciously. His ear is not well formed for nice distinction of sounds, who would think the line improved by a monosyllable epithet, which would make it run more smoothly.<sup>1</sup>

A similar combination in Milton - "glory above" - which must be elided for correctness of scansion calls forth further comment on elision in general -

. . . though elisions of this kind, and many others frequent in Milton's practice, have fallen into disuse, their discontinuance is no advantage. In the ear of a person accustomed to meet them in the Greek and Latin Classics, where they abound, they have often an agreeable and sometimes a very fine effect. But it is admitted, that discretion and a good taste are requisite to the proper use of them, and that too frequently employed, or unskillfully, they may prove indeed deformities.<sup>2</sup>

The elision of which he did not approve was that of the "e" in the past participles. He deplored its wide acceptance, feeling that it resulted in "a clutter of consonants with only a single vowel to assist their utterance, which has a barbarous effect, both in the sound, and in the appearance."<sup>3</sup>

1. Cowper on "Paradise Lost" - Southey, "The Works of William Cowper," London, 1837, vol. XV, p. 320

2. Ibid., p. 299

3. Ibid., p. 504



### Compound epithet

Nostalgia for the classic beauties likewise influences Cowper's opinion on Compound epithets. And here again his defense seems eminently reasonable, showing that the epithet is as "agreeable to the genius"<sup>1</sup> of the English language as to the Greek, with such examples of compound epithets in common use as "black-eyed, nut-brown, crook-shank'd, hump-back'd"<sup>1</sup> (and showing also how habit gets the better of reasoning in his use in casual prose of such elision of the "e" in the participle as he has condemned elsewhere for poetry). The whole treatment of elision and compound epithets is that of a classicist missing familiar classical landmarks in the English of his day.

### Grammar

Before undertaking the editing of Milton, Cowper had expressed the belief that poetic license should never be allowed "to trespass upon grammatical propriety".<sup>2</sup> However, when he finds Milton bordering upon such trespass he sees the value of it for poetic effect. Milton deviates from the grammatical rule when the meaning is obvious or when such deviation contributes more grace and harmony. To any who would use Milton's deviations from grammatical correctness as an excuse for grammatical license, Cowper writes-

1. To Joseph Hill, Nov. 14, 1791

2. To Wm. Unwin, Aug. 4, 1785



Nor does Milton ever transgress grammatical propriety, but for the sake of an advantage more than equivalent. Let poets err on this condition only, and the precedent will do no mischief.<sup>1</sup>

### Parentheses

Common sense again dictated Cowper's opinions on the use of parentheses. If they are too frequent, too long, or detract from the clarity of the writing then they "are a proof that the writer's head is cloudy, that he has not properly arranged his matter, or is not well skilled in the graces of expression."<sup>2</sup> Robert Browning, infinitely greater poet as he is, might well have taken note of this humble criticism. Such a parenthesis as Cowper would approve is of about one half line in length. Characteristically his example is taken from the classics, from Virgil's Aeneid. Such examples are to be found in the usage "of some of our finest writers, as well as in the hands of the ancient poets and orators" and give a "peculiar elegance".<sup>2</sup>

### Technical terms

Rules give way to common sense as Cowper considers the use of technical terms. Addison and Newton had both applied the rule rigidly in criticism of Milton, seeming to hunt for terms they could call technical in order to condemn them. Certainly this must have been so when Dr. Newton criticizes Milton for the technicality of the expression "under the lee". Cowper's answer seems adequate:

1. Southey, vol. XV, pp. 314-315
2. To Wm. Unwin, Apr. 27, 1782



What other word could he have found in our language, by which to express the situation intended? and was not such a word (of maritime use indeed, but almost universally understood in our country) to be preferred to a tedious circumlocution?<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps more might be said in favor of the technicality of such a term as "pilasters", but on the other hand, as Cowper points out, if Milton is justified in describing the structure to which the term is applied, he must necessarily use the term, for he "had no other means of making his account intelligible".<sup>2</sup>

#### Revision

Despite his aversion to excessive smoothness, Cowper favored frequent revision. "To touch and retouch is . . . the secret of almost all good writing, especially in verse."<sup>3</sup> In his own writing he aimed always to teach by pleasing and so felt bound to please the taste of his day, which he felt to be over-refined - "delicate to excess".<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, he "finished and polished, and touched, and re-touched, with the utmost care."<sup>4</sup>

#### Clearness

Nothing, no matter how well adjusted to the public taste, would either delight or teach if it was not clear. Verse that had not clearness was to Cowper's mind "good

1. Scouthey, vol. XV, p. 303

2. Ibid., p. 311

3. To Wm. Unwin, July 2, 1780

4. To Wm. Unwin, October 6, 1781



**for little".** Cowper's estimation of the importance of clearness is incorporated in one of his rare conscious pieces of instruction in poetry. Young Johnny of Norfolk had tried his hand at some poetry, and Cowper's advice was -

Only remember that, in writing, perspicuity is always more than half the battle.<sup>1</sup> The want of it is the ruin of more than half the poetry that is published. A meaning that does not stare you in the face is as bad as no-meaning, because nobody will take the pains to pore for it.<sup>1</sup>

### Description

Such clearness, especially in description, Cowper did not feel to be compatible with neo-classic ornament. In Homer he found "the minuteness of a Flemish painter".<sup>2</sup> No matter what part of animate or inanimate nature Homer described, he was always accurate and never "sacrificed beauty to embellishment".<sup>3</sup> The difference between this and the neo-classicists, who boasted so much of copying nature, so impressed Cowper as to inspire him to one of his vividly apt similes:

Oh! how unlike some describers that I have met with, of modern days, who smother you with words, words, words, and then think that they have copied nature; while all the while nature was an object either not looked at, or not sufficiently: as if a painter, having a beautiful woman to draw, should give you,

1. To John Johnson, Feb. 28, 1790

2. Cowper's preface to first ed. of his trans. of Homer, Southey, "Works", vol. XI, p. xvii

3. To Lady Hesketh, Jan. 2, 1786



indeed, something like the outline of her face, but <sup>1</sup> should fill it up with all the colours of the rainbow.

Such writers "of modern days" did not include James Thomson, recognized romantic pioneer. It is not surprising that Cowper considered him to be "admirable in description".<sup>2</sup>

### Figures of speech

Admiring clearness as he did, and disliking useless adornment, Cowper naturally disliked figures of speech which detracted from the clarity of an idea simply to display their own fine ornament. In such a class he placed "long-winded" metaphors which were apt to "halt at the latter end of their progress".<sup>3</sup> The vividly bold Hebrew metaphors of the Old Testament were quite to Cowper's taste; that portion of Scripture which pictures mountains as breaking into singing, and fields clapping their hands together he feels to have poetry "which was never equalled".<sup>4</sup> Similes were all right in their place, which he thought was more apt to be poetry than prose, that is if the simile were at all elaborate. He himself often clarified his ideas in prose by excellent similes (cf. above). And indeed even in poetry he felt that the simile was of more value in adding clearness than in striving to elevate. He was so convinced of this that he was even willing to

1. To Lady Hesketh, Jan. 2, 1786

2. To Mrs. King, June 19, 1788

3. To John Newton, Feb. 18, 1781

4. To Thomas Hayley, Mar. 14, 1793



use as examples some of Homer's similes which by no means elevate the subject.<sup>1</sup> Similes might also be drawn from popular conceptions, from ideas having no reality and never seen "except by the dreaming vulgar".<sup>2</sup> Anyone who criticizes such similes could confine himself to prose.

Verse is not their element. It is always lawful for a poet to avail himself of a prevalent and popular opinion, and to realize a creature of the fancy, merely for the sake of embellishment and illustration.<sup>3</sup>

1."It is by no means necessary, that a simile should be more magnificent than the subject, it is enough that it gives us a clearer and more distinct perception of it, than we could have without it. Were it the indispensable duty of a simile to elevate, as well as to illustrate, what must be done with many of Homer's? When he compares the Grecian troops, pouring themselves forth from camp and fleet in the plain of Troy, to bees issuing from a hollow rock; or the body of Patroclus in dispute between the two armies, to an ox hide larded, and stretched by the curriers, we must condemn him utterly as guilty of degrading his subject, when he should exalt it. But the exaltation of his subject was no part of Homer's concern on these occasions, he intended nothing more than the clearest possible impression of it on the mind of his hearers." Southey, "Works", vol. XV, p. 321

2. Ibid., p. 320

3. Ibid., p. 320



Objections to mixed figures he considered to be governed by a desire for too much polish, and in his prose indulged himself with some satisfaction in the use of mixed figures.<sup>1</sup> Allegory he defended, especially in Milton's epic, "as an exquisite beauty";<sup>2</sup> Addison's objections to which he found "slight" and "fanciful".<sup>2</sup>

### Satire

Satire was one of the literary genera in the appreciation of which Cowper was more romanticist than classicist. In the satires of the classic writers he found some of their least attractive material, for he could never reconcile himself to scurrility. In the satires of the neo-classicists of his own day this same hated scurrility was combined with an undemocratic air of superiority toward those less fortunate socially or economically. These characteristics, combined with the cruel use of personal references, were such as his gentle nature could not countenance. One of his consolations in having been finally brought to publish "John Gilpin" was that the poem would furnish "a laugh that hurts nobody" "in a world like this, abounding with subjects for satire, and with satirical wits to mark them."<sup>3</sup>

1. To John Newton, Oct. 4, 1781

2. Southey, "Works", vol. XV, p. 323

3. To William Unwin, Nov. 18, 1782



When satire was good-natured and just "rais'd a smile at folly's cost"<sup>1</sup>, Cowper enjoyed it. This type he found often in Arbuthnot and Swift. Satire also met with his approval when it was calculated to point out the errors of mankind even in a more deliberate fashion. Such he found in Fielding, particularly enjoying it in "Jonathan Wild" which he found "highly entertaining" where he pronounced the satire on great men to be "witty" and "perfectly just".<sup>2</sup> In Addison also he found "satire just and keen"<sup>4</sup> since it was leveled against lewdness and obscenity.

On the other hand this same satire if misused makes the satirist "a public scourge". "Wit so miserably misemployed" is "contemptible" - such is Cowper's sentence on Dr. John Wolcott whom he terms "that licentious lampooner of dignities".<sup>5</sup> Even "St. Patrick's dean"<sup>6</sup> "Too often rails to gratify his spleen".<sup>6</sup> Pope's "Dunciad" seemed even more worthy of condemnation, for Cowper could see no reason for including some of the writers who were given the dubious honor of mention in that work except that their names happened to fit the meter.<sup>7</sup> Sound perception again underlies Cowper's most general pronouncement

1. Cowper, "Table Talk", lines 656-8

2. To Samuel Rose, Dec. 8, 1793

3. To Lady Hesketh, Oct. 5, 1787

4. "Table Talk", line 640

5. To Lady Hesketh, Sept. 8, 1787

6. "Charity", lines 499-500

7. To Samuel Rose, Aug. 8, 1789



on the subject -

Unless a love of virtue light the flame,  
 Satire is, more than those he brands, to blame;  
 He hides behind a magisterial air  
 His own offences, and strips others bare.<sup>1</sup>

## EROSE

As in poetry, so in prose, Cowper desired simplicity -  
<sup>2</sup>  
 "affectation is an emetic". After having termed a style  
 "plain and neat", Cowper adds, "I do not know how I  
<sup>3</sup>  
 could . . . pay it a greater compliment."<sup>3</sup> He admired  
 the familiar style of Beattie and commended him for being  
 so much at his ease "that his own character appears in  
 every page, and which is very rare, we see not only the  
 writer but the man".<sup>4</sup> Blair did not appeal to him because  
<sup>5</sup>  
 he was "too conscious that he is addressing the public".<sup>5</sup>  
 Gibbon and Robertson were likewise lacking in appeal  
 because "they discover a perpetual desire to exhibit  
<sup>2</sup>  
 themselves to advantage".<sup>2</sup> Further concerning them he  
 writes: "They disgust me always, Robertson with his pomp  
 and his strut, and Gibbon with his finical and French  
<sup>2</sup>  
 manners."<sup>2</sup>

## Historians

The criticism of Robertson and Gibbon had been used

1. Cowper, "Charity", lines 491-4
2. To John Newton, July, 27, 1783
3. To John Newton, June 13, 1783
4. To W. Unwin, Apr. 5, 1784
5. To John Newton, Apr. 16, 1784



in commending Newton as superior to them as a historian. Whether or not this judgment is true, the basis for it is sound - "They sing, and you say; which, as history is a thing to be said, and not sung, is in my judgment, very much to your advantage."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Cowper was kinder to Robertson, but found Hume more pleasing as a historian.<sup>2</sup> Among other historians Josephus was criticized for being "tediously circumstantial" and Tacitus lauded for being "concise without obscurity, and affecting without being poetical".<sup>3</sup>

#### Letter writing<sup>4</sup>

If a historian must strive for a natural style, how much more must a letter writer. No doubt Cowper would have been a little kinder in his scathing criticism of Chesterfield's letters had that gentleman not added the curse of elegance to the curse of his wicked principles. Certainly Dr. Johnson made more appeal in his letters, where "he expresses himself somewhat in the stile of other folk"<sup>5</sup> than he did in his formal prose. As a distinguished letter writer, (who did not favor the gaining of distinction by the publication of letters) Cowper may well set down principles for letter writing.

1. To John Newton, July 27, 1783
2. To Wm. Unwin, June 22, 1780
3. To Wm. Unwin, Nov. 24, 1783
4. For a full length treatment of Cowper's views on letter writing, see Chapter VI of my thesis.
5. To Lady Heseltine, July 5, 1783



Such as he does express are in keeping with his desire for naturalness. A representative item is his declaration that method is "never more out of place than in a letter",<sup>1</sup> which he always wrote "without premeditation".<sup>2</sup>

A letter is written as a conversation is maintained; or a journey performed; not be preconcerted or pre-meditated means, a new contrivance, or an invention never heard of before - but merely by maintaining a progress . . . If a man may talk without thinking, why may he not write upon the same terms?<sup>3</sup>

### Argument

His pronouncements in this field are few, but to the point. He writes, "I lay it down for a rule, that when much ingenuity is necessary to gain an argument credit, that argument is unsound at bottom."<sup>4</sup> This rule he applies to advantage in considering Hume's argument in favor of suicide. Hume's argument, that because it would be no sin to divert the course of the Danube it would be none to let out a few ounces of blood from an artery, he shows to recommend not only suicide but homicide by pointing out the results of the Danube experiment. But his most valid refutation of the argument is by showing it to be based on a fallacious analogy

1. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 29, 1786

2. To John Newton, Aug. 16, 1781

3. To Wm. Unwin, Aug. 6, 1780

4. To Wm. Unwin, May 12, 1783



between "the life of a man and the water of a river."<sup>1</sup>

### Narrative

When we of the twentieth century read an eighteenth century novel and find it long drawn out, we are usually given to understand that the people of that day found no fault with the profuseness of these writers. If this is true in general, it is not true of Cowper. His opinion of the popular fiction of his day finds many an echo in our time and seems rather in advance of his period. One could wish that Richardson and many another equally prolific could have profited by Cowper's advice -

He that tells a long Story should take care that it be not made a long Story by his manner of telling it. His Expression should be natural and his method clear, the incidents should be interrupted by very few Reflections and Parentheses should be entirely discarded.

This and other critical advice on the narrative may well be adopted by writers of any period. He suggested that these "sedentary weavers of long tales" might find "native humor" useful instead of piling up dull detail "of parentage and birth" and "conversations, dull and dry"<sup>2</sup> with no variety. As for the plot, the writer must strive to bring it to "a decent end"<sup>3</sup> being always concerned to stick with

1. To Wm. Unwin, July 12, 1784

2. To John Newton, Feb. 25, 1781

3. Cowper, "Conversation," lines 203-220



the probable, not dealing in surprise or baiting his hook "with prodigies and lies". He should avoid retelling old stuff and should see to it that all his detail had a central focus, in short -

A tale should be judicious, clear, succinct;<sup>1</sup>  
The language plain, and incidents well link'd.

Knowing Cowper's turn of mind, it is not surprising to find him noting the parable of the prodigal son as an example of the finest in narrative, "the most beautiful fiction that ever was invented".<sup>2</sup>

In his opinions on the sentimental novel Cowper was either ahead of his day or else he was more frank to admit what many realized but did not mention. One feels that his criticism was aimed at Richardson's "Pamela" or at least at the Pamela type of thing. So many writers of the eighteenth century cloaked a lustful tale in moral maxims and expected the public to take it for a sermon. Cowper called it just what it was - the appeal to readers who "owe the gust And relish of their pleasure all to lust". He condemned the "sniv'ling and driv'ling folly" and the "sentimental frippery" of "corresponding misses" who "fill the ream" with a tale of being "Caught in a delicate soft silken net By some lewd earl or rake-hell baronet".<sup>3</sup> Such a story is but an "inflammatory tale"<sup>3</sup>

1. Cowper, "Conversation", lines 226-244

2. To Lady Hesketh, Aug. 1, 1765

3. Cowper, "The Progress of Error", lines 307-330



which, after "kindling a combustion of desire" thinks to "quench the fire" with some "cold moral".<sup>1</sup> Again rather in advance of his day, he commended the work of Fielding, because he saw in his work a genuine desire to reform. One feels too that the classical background of Fielding's ideas must have appealed to Cowper. So often Fielding's humor is based on a vivid familiarity with those classics, Greek and Latin, which Cowper so much admired. On the rare occasions when Fielding erred in being tiresome Cowper cited his difficulty. For instance in "Jonathan Wild" the character of Mrs. Heartfree is rather too charming, so consistently so as to become tiresome. Cowper realized that Fielding might well have intended in her "a satirical glance at novelists, whose heroines are generally all bewitching" but felt that "it is a fault that he had better have noticed in another manner, and not have exemplified in his own".<sup>2</sup>

### Drama

In later life Cowper concerned himself little or not at all with the drama. During the Temple period he was like all other London men about town, a theatre frequenter. He said then of the plays on the Italian model that "The portions styled recitatives are absurd

1. Cowper, "The Progress of Error", lines 519-20

2. To Samuel Rose, Dec. 8, 1793



beyond measure, but the songs are most sweet".<sup>1</sup> In later years he gave James Hurdis some sound but not startlingly original criticism on a drama which he was working over. Of this he wrote, in part -

If the play were designed for representation, I should be apt to think Cecilia's first speech rather too long, and should prefer to have it broken into dialogue, by an interposition now and then from one of her sisters. But since it is designed, as I understand, for the closet,<sup>2</sup> only, that objection seems of no importance.

To summarize, Cowper is seen to be governed by common sense more than anything else in his opinions on grammar, parentheses, technical terms, clearness, letter writing, argument, and drama. This same common sense is tinged with a little Miltonic classicism in his attitude toward elision and compound epithets. Classicism again influences his attitude toward Fielding, while his criticisms of the sentimental novel of his day, and of narrative in general seem governed once more by good common sense, and to be in advance of his day. Also in advance of his day is his preference for the familiar style in prose as over against Johnsonian ponderosity or Robinsonian elegance. Again at variance with the custom of his day were his

1. Translated from a Latin letter to Cletworthy Rowley, Aug. 1758

2. To James Hurdis, Mar. 25, 1792



views on description and on satire. The neo-classic following of nature he saw to be a mockery, and their satire to be of no value except in the cases where it was free from scurrility and with a moral purpose. As for revision he would agree to the necessity for a great deal of this to conform with the over nice taste of his day, because his purpose in writing was always the classic - delight in order to teach, and he felt he could not teach unless he conformed sufficiently to the taste of his day and so delighted. His views on figures of speech were so much his own that he held them in defiance of the opinion of his period and also in the face of a recognized variance between them and some of the classical examples. One may therefore pronounce Cowper to be in his constructive criticism a man actuated in the main by clear, unbiased common sense; very little influenced by the prevailing opinions of his time; definitely opposed to the major neo-classic principles; somewhat swayed by classical sympathies. Such a compound might well be simplified to the term - classical romanticist.



## V

## POETRY AND THE POET

English critics from earliest times have felt called upon to defend poetry and in that defense to show it as superior to prose. Cowper was not concerned with presenting formal arguments to prove this. As was so often the case, he merely stated the case as it seemed to him and in that way presented ideas more convincing to the layman than would have been an intricately formulated defense. It was his opinion that "Prose answers every common end" and suffices to express "all the floating thoughts we find upon the surface of the mind".<sup>1</sup> For his own writing he found that if he used prose to express his ideas on something upon which he felt strongly the result would be "verbose, inflated, and disgusting".<sup>2</sup> But poetry he found to be "a suitable vehicle for the most vehement expressions [his] thoughts suggest".<sup>2</sup> If this strong feeling led him to use satire, as it often did, he felt poetry to be particularly appropriate, for it was his conviction that "there is a sting in verse, that prose neither has, nor can have".<sup>3</sup>

1. To Lady Austen, Dec. 17, 1781

2. To W. Unwin, June 18, 1780

3. To W. Unwin, May 8, 1784



We have seen already that Cowper felt that no poet should use satire except for purposes of reform. Like Milton, he conceived of the poet's calling as a high one and felt that the poet should have "a soul exalted above earth" and should also be guided and perhaps restrained from satiric cruelties by "a mind skill'd in the characters that form mankind". But these assets will make him no poet unless he have

Fervency, freedom, fluency of thought,  
 Harmony, strength, words exquisitely sought;  
 Fancy, that from the bow that spans the sky  
     Brings colours, dipt in heav'n, that never die.<sup>1</sup>

Combined with this rather romantic expression of the qualities to be found in a poet we find a more classical conception of the abilities expected. Cowper's religious fervor together with his enthusiasm for the classics makes it easy to see why the idea of poet as "vates" would appeal to him. Some of his own best poetry goes into his expression of this idea -

A terrible sagacity informs  
 The poet's heart; he looks to distant storms;  
 He hears the thunder ere the tempest low'rs;  
 And, arm'd with strength surpassing human pow'rs,  
 Seizes events as yet unknown to man,  
 And darts his soul into the dawning plan.  
 Hence, in a Roman youth, the graceful name  
     Of prophet and of poet was the same.<sup>2</sup>

1. Cowper, "Table Talk," lines 700 - 705

2. Ibid., lines 494 - 501



Such far-seeing sagacity does not, in Cowper's mind, enable the poet to criticize intelligently his own production, for partiality is bound to creep in. And so he says that the poet, being "partial to all his productions," is "of all men the most unfit to be Judge in his own cause."<sup>1</sup>

Again Cowper reminds us of the elder critics in his discussion of the purpose of poetry. He frequently reiterates the principle of delight in order to teach. Such a purpose he can not reconcile with the hireling muse of the laureate, who must supply when occasion demands "His quit-rent ode, his pepper-corn of praise".<sup>2</sup> The suggestion of his friends that he be presented for the laureateship was frightful to him.

Heaven guard my brow from the wreath you mention,  
whatever wreath beside may hereafter adorn them!  
It would be a leaden extinguisher clamped on all the  
fire of my genius, and I shculd never more produce  
a line worth reading.<sup>3</sup>

Neither the paid hire nor the mere fame that went with the office appealed to Cowper. He felt that poetry written merely "To float a bubble on the breath of fame" was put to a debased use, and that it was a profanation to produce poetry only "To purchase, at the fool-frequented fair of vanity, a wreath for self to wear".<sup>4</sup>

1. To J. Newton, Dec. 31, 1781

2. Cowper, "Table Talk," line 110

3. To Lady Hesketh, May 28, 1790

4. Cowper, "Table Talk", 11. 746, 7547



Not that a poet should not desire fame. Cowper himself admitted that his purpose was "to acquire fame",<sup>1</sup> but he desired that fame in order that his more serious purpose might have the wider results, much as an evangelist wishes to be heard by a large audience.

Cowper's expression of this serious purpose is most clear in the following lines -

The gift, whose office is the Giver's praise,  
To trace him in his word, his works, his ways,  
Then spread the rich discov'ry, and invite  
Mankind to share in the divine delight.<sup>1</sup>

In my opinion Willy Hoffmann has interpreted this too narrowly when he says of this "Religion ist also das vornehmste Thema der Poesie".<sup>2</sup> There seems not to be the proper distinction between poetry written with a religious purpose and religious poetry. The purpose is implicit throughout, but Cowper was too much imbued with the principle of delighting in order to teach to allow his poetry to be predominantly religious. His emphasis on the country and the beauties of God's creation was an application of this principle to his religious teaching, as his expression "divine delight" should suggest. One can cite in his poetry and his discussions of it innumerable examples of his statement that poets "Seek to delight, that they may mend mankind". The most

1. Cowper, "Table Talk", lines 750-753

2. Hoffmann, p. 81



effective method of clarifying just what he means by this expression is the examination of his application of it to the criticism of his own poems. Here, too, we find some of his most amusing metaphors.

In explaining why he wishes to present his material in such a way that it will please the taste of his day and so bring him popularity, he writes:

I cast a sidelong glance at the good liking of the world at large. I believe I can say it was more for the sake of their advantage and instruction than their praises. They are children - if we give them physick, we must sweeten the rim of the Cup with honey.<sup>1</sup>

On another occasion he expresses his desire to be useful and admits that he knows that he can not be so without entertaining, continuing, "I have therefore fixed these two Strings upon my Bow, & by the help of both have done my best to send my Arrow to the Mark".<sup>2</sup>

Of "Table Talk" he writes -

I am merry that I may decoy people into my Company, and grave that they may be the better for it . . . I do not know, but am inclined to suspect that if my Muse was to go forth clad in Quaker color, without one bit of ribband to enliven her Appearance, she might walk from one end of London to the other as little noticed as if she were one of y<sup>e</sup> sister-hood indeed.<sup>3</sup>

1. To Wm. Bull, Mar. 24, 1782
2. To Mrs. Cowper, Oct. 19, 1781
3. To J. Newton, Feb. 18, 1781



His figure in expressing a similar method and purpose in the composition of "Charity" is irresistible -

the gentleman's Muse wears Methodist shoes . . .  
and though she assume a borrowed plume, and now  
and then wear a tittering air, 'tis only her plan,  
to catch if she can, the giddy and gay, as they go  
that way."<sup>1</sup>

The most complete statement of his method and purpose is given in his discussion of "The Task". Here we have not only his religious purpose, but also his preference for country over city and his attempt to emphasize the values of country life.

My principal purpose is to allure the reader, by character, by scenery, by imagery, and such poetical embellishments, to the reading of what may profit him. Subordinately to this, to combat the predilection in favour of a metropolis, that beggars and exhausts the country, by evacuating it of all its principal inhabitants: and collaterally, and as far as is consistent with this double intention, to have a stroke at vice, vanity, and folly, wherever I find them.<sup>2</sup>

Even hard riding John Gilpin had to be seen as a possible aid in this general purpose before Cowper became quite reconciled to acknowledging the gentleman as his creation. Cowper thought that John might furnish such a large item of delight as would do much to bring his creator's more serious work before the public. He

1. To J. Newton, July 12, 1781

2. To J. Newton, Nov. 27, 1784



thought that his volumes might be brought to travel a greater distance than they might have otherwise reached "If they had not been ushered into the world by that notable horseman".<sup>1</sup>

No matter how fine the purpose of a poet, he can hardly be expected to succeed if he have not true genius. No imitation can bring him success, nor will mere following of rules suffice. To be sure Cowper held no brief for untutored genius. He discussed schoolboy verse quite fully on one occasion, characterizing it with perception and concluding that "it is not in general till reading and observation have settled the taste" that we are able "to execute what is good".<sup>2</sup> However, he was careful to make clear that this reading was in order that the writer might be "refreshed and replenished" and by no means with a view to imitation. Such imitation is difficult to avoid, especially when the material read excites admiration, for "we imitate, in spite of ourselves, just in proportion as we admire".<sup>3</sup> And this imitation, strong fortress of neo-classic doctrine, seemed to Cowper the greatest threat to the expression of true genius and the most abominable substitute for genius.

Imitation, even of the best models, is my aversion; it is servile and mechanical, a trick that has

1. To J. Newton, Apr. 22, 1785
2. To Wm. Unwin, Feb. 9, 1782
3. To Wm. Unwin, Nov. 24, 1781



enabled many to usurp the name of author, who could not have written at all, if they had not written upon the pattern of somebody indeed original.<sup>1</sup>

We have already noted Cowper's own careful avoidance of the reading of any English poets, lest he might be led in spite of himself to imitate them.

Even if the poet sets out on his own, avoiding imitation, he can not expect that a set of rules will be all the cargo he needs -

A poet does not work by square or line,<sup>2</sup>  
As smiths and joiners perfect a design.<sup>2</sup>

In illustration of genius as rising above rules and not depending for success upon rules, we have Cowper's defense of Churchill against the criticisms of Dr. Johnson. Cowper points out that although Churchill worked hastily he was not subject to the common faults of writers, a circumstance which he cites as proof "that he did not judge by a borrowed Standard or from Rules laid down by Critics, but that he was qualified to do it by his own Native Powers and his great Superiority of Genius,"<sup>3</sup> and goes on to point out that one who wrote so hastily would have in his hurry forgotten the rules if he had not been guided in the right track by his own peculiar talents.

After the publication of the second volume of his own poems, Cowper was discussing it with John Newton and

1. To Wm. Unwin, Nov. 24, 1781

2. Cowper, "Conversation", lines 789-790

3. To Wm. Unwin, n.d.



in the course of the letter mentioned his having avoided imitation - "Having imitated no man, I may reasonably hope that I shall not incur the disadvantage of a comparison with my betters".<sup>1</sup> Having avoided "sameness with others" he rather hoped that the reviewer would gratify him by repeating the criticism which had been given to his former volume, that of not knowing "to what class of writers to refer"<sup>1</sup> the author. Any adverse criticism which was made of his singularities did not disturb him, since he had justified them to himself as the best procedure. For instance, in "Five Hundred Celebrated Authors now Living" he was criticized for lack of method. Of this he writes to Lady Hesketh that he had organized his material with "that sort of slight connection which poetry demands" and continues by pointing out that "in poetry (except professedly of the didactic kind) a logical precision would be stiff, pedantic, and ridiculous."<sup>2</sup>

This same dependence on his own judgment led him when he considered the matter of the proper subject for poetry. Having already noted his conception of the purpose of poetry as primarily the praise of the Giver of poetic talent, we are not surprised to find a strong emphasis on the religious as a subject for poetry, but

1. To J. Newton, Dec. 11, 1784
2. To Lady Hesketh, July 28, 1788



not so strong or exclusive an emphasis as Hoffmann's statement, quoted above, would lead one to expect.

What he found to be distasteful as poetic subject-matter he condemned wherever he found it. Much as he admired Dryden's excellent qualities he found too many of his productions "blotted here and there with an unchaste allusion".<sup>1</sup> Even Homer at times used his "wonderful powers" on "repulsive subject matter" or some "disgusting subject", or even such "woeful work" as a list of killed and wounded, although Cowper places the blame on Homer's age rather than on Homer.<sup>2</sup> Even Wat Prior can not be forgiven for using such bad characters and situations as are found in "Henry and Emma", although again Cowper softens the condemnation, this time by defending the presentation as lively even though the material be worthy of censure.<sup>3</sup>

Hardly less worthy of censure than the poet who deals in the repulsive is that one who presumes to treat the practical in poetic fashion. Cowper has no more use for the poet who "cover'd with the dust of dreaming study and pedantic rust" presumes to "prate and preach about what others prove" than he has for the scientist who tries to disprove what the poet feels by instinct.<sup>4</sup>

1. To W. Unwin, Jan. 17, 1782

2. To Walter Bagot, July 4, 1786

3. To W. Unwin, Jan. 5, 1782

4. Cowper, "Table Talk", lines 170-172



Similarly unworthy of poetic treatment is the ever changing "subject of the day". A poet who chooses such matter for his consideration will soon find that "he has laid his leaf-gold upon touchwood, which crumbled away under his fingers . . . . these little things are so fugitive, that while a man catches at the subject, he is only filling his hand with smoke."<sup>1</sup>

In general he felt mere trifles to be unworthy subject-matter. Poetry that indulged in such was mere "push-pin play"; if it summoned the muse to the theme of "a soldier's feather, or a lady's glove" it would find the fruit of her labour to be only "whipt-cream"

As if an eagle flew aloft, and then-  
Stoop'd from his highest pitch to pounce a wren.

As if a poet, purposing to wed,  
Should carve himself a wife in gingerbread.<sup>2</sup>

This does not exclude all light-hearted poetry, for Cowper never forgets the necessary delight which must accompany his teaching. He envied Swift his skill with "la bagatelle" and realized that a serious poem would fly heavily like a swan in comparison with a jest that "has the wings of a swallow, that never tire, and that carry it into every nook and corner".<sup>3</sup>

Remembering Cowper's romantic championing of the value of individual genius above that of rules, one

1. To W. Unwin, Feb. 27, 1789

2. Cowper, "Table Talk", lines 547-555

3. To W. Unwin, Jan. 17, 1782



feels that his emphasis upon liberty as superior material for serious poetry has some connection with technique as well as with subject matter. Again Hoffmann's emphasis upon religious subject matter seems too strong when we read

Religion, virtue, truth, whate'er we call  
A blessing - freedom is the pledge of all.

. . .  
Lost without thee th'ennobling pow'rs of verse<sup>1</sup>

To be sure Cowper did deplore the fact that "religion has so seldom found A skilful guide into poetic ground" even though he did not agree with Dr. Johnson that religious poetry had never been successful. As he surveyed the hackneyed subjects he felt that something really new would be a poet who would tell the world "That He, who died below, and reigns above, Inspires the song, and that his name is love". Even though "Virtue indeed meets many a rhyming friend" she appears to Cowper to be "half undress'd" because she does not wear "that becoming vest Religion weaves for her".<sup>2</sup> But he realized all too well the difficulty in becoming a popular poet through the use of religious subject-matter. This he blamed upon the age in which he lived, and still perhaps cherished as the ideal if it could only be done.

To aim with success at the spiritual good of mankind, and to become popular by writing on scriptural

1. Cowper, "Table Talk", lines 168-9, 173

2. Ibid., lines 716-738



subjects, were an unreasonable ambition, even for a poet to entertain, in days like these. Verse may have many charms, but has none powerful enough to conquer the aversion of a dissipated age to such instruction.<sup>1</sup>

The only solution of the problem was an evangelical application of the classic principle of delighting in order to teach.

But the poets of his time seemed to Cowper to be much more concerned with manner than with matter, and so they were. Anyone who could be elegant in expression need give little consideration to the depth or moral value of subject matter. The popularity of Lord Chesterfield's graceful opportunism seemed to Cowper to be a horrible example of this. So far as he could see

Manner is all in all, whate'er is writ,  
The substitute for genius, sense, and wit.<sup>2</sup>

All the rhetoric of the poets was like quicksilver, which "Shines as it runs, but, grasp'd at, slips away".<sup>3</sup> This empty elegance of manner he blamed to a large degree upon Pope, who "Made poetry a mere mechanic art; and ev'ry warbler has his tune by heart". Nothing, of course, could more deeply offend his sense that poetry was not done by "square or line" and that imitation was the worst

1. To W. Unwin, Aug. 4, 1783

2. Cowper, "Table Talk", lines 542-543

3. Cowper, "The Progress of Error", lines 21-22



of poetic sins. But this emphasis upon mechanical perfection of manner had made the taste of the day "refined, and delicate to excess".<sup>1</sup>

To his mind the work of Vincent Bourne was much more acceptable, because he "charms more by the implicitness and playfulness of his ideas than by the neatness and purity of his verse".<sup>2</sup> The figures Cowper uses to clarify his idea of simplicity and natural beauty have a strong romantic flavor. He would have verse that pleases "like some cottage beauty . . . Quite unindebted to the tricks of art",<sup>3</sup> "unmanacled by form", "natural as is the flowing stream", and in a triumph of telling phraseology he finally terms it "Elegant as simplicity".<sup>4</sup> Such simplicity he recognized as having become "a very rare quality in a writer".<sup>5</sup> In his day poets seemed too much concerned "In sorting flow'rs to suit a fickle taste",<sup>6</sup> whereas Homer never "sacrificed beauty to embellishment",<sup>7</sup> but kept always a "majestic plainness . . . as an accomplished person moves gracefully without thinking of it".<sup>8</sup>

1. To W. Unwin, Oct. 6, 1781
2. To W. Unwin, May 23, 1781
3. Cowper, "Table Talk", lines 524-525
4. Ibid., lines 538, 589, 592
5. To W. Unwin, Nov. 24, 1783
6. Cowper, "Hope", line 767
7. To Lady Hesketh, Jan. 2, 1786
8. To Lady Hesketh, Feb. 19, 1786



Representative of the spirit of the time and opposed to Homer, Cowper again saw Pope as the chief sinner, "Ornament for ever! cries Pope - Simplicity for ever! cries Homer".<sup>1</sup> Not that Cowper felt that it was easy to get away from ornament; he recognized it as the most difficult thing in poetry. His presentation of its difficulties embodies a statement of what he conceived to be the ideal familiar style in poetry, and is strongly prophetic of Wordsworth:

Every man conversant with verse-writing knows, and knows by painful experience, that the familiar style is of all styles the most difficult to succeed in. To take verse speak the language of prose, without being prosaic - to marshal the words of it in such an order as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extemporary speaker, yet without meanness, harmoniously, elegantly, and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme,<sup>2</sup> is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake.

For his own poetry, he strove to please the taste of his day in so far as his devotion to simplicity permitted but refused to give himself over to ornament - "I have not at all consulted their approbation, who account nothing grand that is not turgid, or elegant that is not bedizoned with metaphor."<sup>3</sup>

Although he refused to indulge in ornament, Cowper

1. To Mrs. King, Apr. 22, 1789

2. To W. Unwin, Jan. 17, 1762

3. Preface to Homer. Southey, "Life and Works of Wm. Cowper", vol. XI, pp. xv-xvii



realized that were he to offend the excessively delicate taste then prevalent he would "forfeit at once all hope of being useful". He therefore "finished and polished, and touched, and retouched, with the utmost care".<sup>1</sup> Yet he recognized a superior genius in Churchill who could disregard such polish and still surpass more careful writers:

where shall we find in any of those Authors who finish their Works with the Exactness of a Flemish Pencil, those Bold & daring Strokes of Fancy, those Numbers so hazardously ventured upon & so happily finished, the latter so compressd and yet so clear, & ye Colouring so sparingly laid on, and yet with such a beautifull Effect.<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not Churchill is worthy of such praise if his poetry be detached from his friendship for Cowper, the general statements are universally true for poetry itself.

What troubled him most in contemporary taste was the emphasis upon "creamy smoothness"<sup>3</sup> at the expense of energy. The writers wanted a line to run "as smooth as quicksilver" or else they were offendel. "A critic of the present day serves a poem as a cock does a dead turkey, when she fastens the leis of it to a post and draws out all the sinews."<sup>4</sup> This was the fault of Pope

1. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 6, 1781

2. To Wm. Unwin, n.d.

3. Cowper, "Table Talk", line 513

4. To Joseph Johnson, n.d.



whose emphasis upon smoothness had been so imitated that it had served to "emasculate and weaken all we write". But such smoothness seemed to suggest to Cowper a sort of slick insincerity; he preferred "a manly rough line, with a deal of meaning in it" to "a whole poem full of musical periods, that have nothing but their oily smoothness to recommend them." Again he wrote, with another of his vivid similes, "There is a roughness on a plum which nobody that understands fruit would rub off, though the plum would be much more polished without it".<sup>1</sup>

Cowper was not perverse or inartistic in his aversion to smoothness. He felt that the rough lines should be introduced with a purpose and not be included because of lack of ability to smooth them. Again he shows himself to be no blind admirer of the classic writers when he says of Lucilius that since he lived at a time when "Roman verse had not yet received its polish" he, "instead of introducing artfully his rugged lines, and to serve a particular purpose, had probably seldom, and never but by accident, composed a smooth one."<sup>2</sup> One could best appreciate the artistic introduction of a rough line in a long poem. Cowper had followed this practice in his translation of Homer and

1. To Joseph Johnson, n.d.

2. Cowper's preface to Homer. Southey, "Works", vol. XI



frequently commended it in Milton's "Paradise Lost". Milton he commended for using such lines when they particularly fitted some grim subject-matter and also when they were used "as foils to the rest" to relieve the ear "from the tedium of an unvaried and perpetual smoothness." This latter practice Cowper considered to be "one of the great secrets of verse-writing in a piece of great length."<sup>1</sup>

In the case of his own verse Cowper strove for such smoothness as he could encompass without sacrificing the sense, variety, or energy of his work. "I always write as smoothly as I can; but . . . I never did, never will, sacrifice the spirit or sense of a passage to the sound of it."<sup>2</sup> When a critic spoke of his inharmonious lines in the translation of Homer he asserted them to be "not more in number than [he] accounted indispensably necessary to a due variation of cadence". Even in answer to a criticism of his publisher concerning one of his lines he would make no change but wrote, "I chose to begin it in that manner for the sake of animation, and am not able to alter it without flattening its energy quite away."<sup>3</sup>

Cowper writes little merely on versification as such. Notable among his ideas on the subject is his championing of the classical idea of quantitative prosody, although I

1. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 20, 1786

2. To Joseph Johnson, n.d.

3. To Joseph Johnson, Sept. 16, 1781



should hardly go so far as to agree with Hoffmann that this is "der Hauptpunkte von C.s metrischer Theorie".<sup>1</sup> In disagreement with the ideas of both Addison and Jonnson, Cowper wrote -

I find every syllable as distinguishably and clearly either long or short in our language as in any other. I know also that without an Attention to the quantity of our syllables, good verse cannot possibly be written, and that ignorance of this matter is one reason why we see so much that is good for nothing. The movement of a verse is always either shuffling or graceful according to our management in this particular . . . .

A further statement of this opinion in Cowper's commentary on Milton's "Paradise Lost" seems more tenable, and the working criticism of long syllables is certainly exemplified in "Paradise Lost" -

though our syllables are not strictly reducible to the rules either of Greek or Latin prosody, they are nevertheless all long or short in the judgement of an accurate ear, and without close attention to syllabic quantity in the construction of our verse, we can give it neither melody nor dignity . . . . The more long syllables there are in a verse, the more the line of it is protracted, and consequently the pace, with which it moves, is the more majestic.<sup>2</sup>

Though Hoffmann does not realize it, Johnson and Cowper agree with each other in the matter of the comparative difficulty of rime and blank verse. Cowper

1. Hoffmann, p. 90

2. To Walter Bagot, Jan. 4, 1791

3. Southey, "Works of Cowper", vol. XV, p. 295



presents the difficulties in the composition of blank verse in order to convince those who feel that "Verse, that claims to be verse in right of its metre only . . . costs the writer little trouble . . ." He shows that these people are laboring under the illusion that the poet has only his metre to attend to. After pointing out how many there are who succeed in riming without becoming poets, he goes on to point out the difficulties in the way of the poet who would gain his reputation by creating blank verse.

It is not sufficient that the lines of blank verse be smooth in themselves, they must also be harmonious in the combination. Whereas the chief concern of the rhymist is to beware that his couplets and his sense be commensurate, lest the regularity of his numbers should be (too frequently at least) interrupted. A trivial difficulty this, compared with those which attend the poet unaccompanied by his bells. He, in order that he may be musical, must exhibit all the variations, as he proceeds, of which ten syllables are susceptible: between the first syllable and the last there is no place at which he must not occasionally pause, and the place of the pause must be perpetually shifted. To effect this variety, his attention must be given, at one and the same time, to the pauses he has already made in the period before him, as well as to that which he is about to take, and to those which shall succeed it. On no lighter terms than these is it possible that blank verse can be written which will not, in the course of a long work, fatigued<sup>1</sup> the ear past all endurance.

1. Cowper's preface to Homer. Southey, "Works", vol. XI pp. xii-xv



In this connection Cowper noted that the pauses in Homer's verse were "frequent and various" and doubted if one could find in his writing a single passage of ten lines "flowing with uninterrupted smoothness".<sup>1</sup> He felt that Milton gained "dignity and variety" by copying this variation from Homer.<sup>2</sup> An illustration in greater detail of the value of this for poetic effects is given in a comment of Cowper's on one of Milton's similes in "Paradise Lost" where he feels that Milton has used "skill and judgment" in the management of his pauses -

while the clouds rise, and the heavens gather blackness, they fall in those parts of the verse where they retard the reader most, and thus become expressive of the solemnity of the subject; but in the latter part of the simile, where the sun breaks out, and the scene brightens, they are so disposed as to allow the verse an easier and less interrupted flow, more suited to the cheerfulness of the occasion.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these considerations, which made Cowper declare blank verse to be the "most difficult species of poetry" he had "ever meddled with",<sup>4</sup> he preferred it to "The clockwork tintinabulum of rhyme".<sup>5</sup>

To the difficulties already mentioned in the writing of blank verse must be added the necessity for "a style

1. Cowper's preface to Homer. Southey, "Works", v. XI, pp. xix-xx
2. Ibid, pp. xii-xiii
3. Cowper on "Paradise Lost", Southey, vol. XV, p. 319
4. To J. Newton, Nov. 27, 1784
5. Cowper, "Table Talk", I. 529



in general more elaborate than rhyme requires, farther removed from the vernacular idiom both in the language itself and in the arrangement of it".<sup>1</sup> In his own blank verse he found the punctuation "of last importance, and of a species peculiar to that composition".<sup>2</sup> His statement of his purpose in that punctuation shows a clear insight into the individual quality of blank verse, and I believe shows him to have had a clearer understanding of its peculiarities than the good doctor with whom he so frequently disagreed. He writes -

I know of no use of points, unless to direct the voice, the management of which, in the reading of blank verse, being more difficult than in the reading of any other poetry, requires perpetual hints and notices, to regulate the inflections, cadences, and pauses.

Perhaps his most typical pronouncement on the whole matter comes at the conclusion of his most sustained treatment of the comparative difficulty of rime and blank verse, "to be poetical without rhyme, is an argument of a sound and classical constitution in any language."<sup>3</sup>

#### ECCLITIC TYPES

##### Epic

In a comment included in his notes on Milton's "Paradise Lost" Cowper discusses the intrusion of the

1. Cowper's Pref. to Homer. Southey, vol. XI, pp.xii-xv
2. To W. Unwin, Oct. 2, 1724
3. Cowper's pref. to Homer. Southey, vol. XI, pp.xii-xv



author into the epic. He cites the opinion of critics in general and of Aristotle in particular, "the chief of them all", that an author should "be hidden as much as possible" and should only on rare occasion come before the reader by way of a remark or a reflection. Homer and Virgil he recognizes as being quite reserved in this matter. When he must consider the fact that Milton does not have this reserve in nearly so great a degree, his defense of Milton is a Puritan one - "it should be considered that there is more real worth and importance in a single reflection of his, than in all those of his heathen predecessors taken together" and that when one realizes the opportunities for "interesting and valuable remarks" which his subject affords, Milton is to be commended for not including more than he does.<sup>1</sup>

### Shorter verse in general

In discussing epitaphs, epigrams, and the like, Cowper writes "there is a closeness of thought and expression necessary in the conclusion of these little things . . . Whatever is short, should be nervous, masculine, and compact."<sup>2</sup>

### Sonnet

One might have supposed that Cowper would have disliked the closely prescribed form of the sonnet, but he

1. Cowper on "Paradise Lost", Southey, vol. XV, pp. 319-20

2. To W. Unwin, July 2, 1780



wrote sonnets himself and expressed a liking for them and showed that he understood their peculiar function -

For my own part I like them much, when they are on subjects proper to them; such, I mean, as are best expressed in a close sententious manner,<sup>1</sup> for they are too short to admit of a loose one.

### Ballad

Cowper had in his temple lays written much against the imitation by British poets of foreign literary types, as his friends had written against imitation of foreign art. It is natural then that he should be favorable to the ballad which he had the perception to see as native to Britain in many of its characteristics.

The ballad is a species of poetry, I believe, peculiar to this country, equally adapted to the drollest and the most tragical subjects. Simplicity and ease are its proper characteristics. Our fore-fathers excelled in it; but we moderns have lost the art. It is observed, that we have few good English ones. But to make amends, we have many excellent ballads..... It is a sort of composition I was ever fond of.<sup>2</sup>

### Pastoral

What Cowper writes of the pastoral is conditioned by his defense of Milton against the criticism of Dr. Johnson, and so one feels that the opinions are colored by the situation. When Dr. Johnson criticizes Milton's "Epitaphium Damonis", Cowper defends it as "a pastoral

1. To Lady Hesketh, Apr. 25, 1792

2. To Wm. Unwin, Aug. 4, 1765



.... equal to any of Virgil's 'Buccolics'" and says of Johnson that "he who never saw any beauty in a rural scene was not likely to have much taste for a pastoral."<sup>1</sup> Yet when he discusses Johnson's criticism of Milton's "Lycidas" he seems to be in agreement with Johnson's attitude toward certain of the artificialities of the pastoral. For he says that in his criticism of the poem John exposes to ridicule "(what is indeed ridiculous enough) the childish prattlement of pastoral composition".<sup>2</sup> All of which seems to conclude in a criticism of Johnson for not liking pastorals together with an agreement with his reasons for not liking them.

#### Ode

Although there is some question as to the authenticity of some of the early periodical essays attributed to Cowper, it is fortunate for us that his "Dissertation on the Modern Ode"<sup>3</sup> is signed with his initials. About this time his friends Lloyd and Colman had published odes to Obscurity and to Oblivion which they had written jointly at the Nonsense Club as parodies of the odes of Mason and Gray.<sup>4</sup> Bonnel Thornton, who like Cowper was also a member of the club, had written a rollicking Ode on St. Cecilia's Day. The spirit in which these young

1. To James Hurdis, Dec. 10, 1791

2. To W. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779

3. Published in St. James Magazine, Apr., 1763

4. Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 55, pp. 433-4



humorists worked is seen in Thornton's prefatory note to the ode, where he assures that it is certainly superior to the odes of "Johhny Dryden, Jemmy Addison, Sawney Fope" and others.<sup>1</sup> One is tempted to quote the ode, which was performed at Ranelagh to a crowded audience,<sup>1</sup> but our business is with Cowper and his "Dissertation".

Throughout, one sees in Cowper's criticisms the leaning toward a romantic scorn for rules, and sees also why he was spared the interest in gothic details found in the romantic pioneers. Cowper was a gay young man about town when these writers were revelling in moss-covered towers and hooting owls, and his outlook was such that he naturally saw the absurdity of it. The jesting manner of the entire treatment explains why in later years the half mad Puritan could still indulge in clever gayety. Typical of his remarks on the variety of measure possible in the cle is this - "he may, in one verse slide into a Lilliputian, and in the next straggle along in an Alexandrine, pairing them together like a dwarf walking by the side of a giant."<sup>2</sup> The pointed irony of his section on rules is sharpened when one recalls his later pronouncements against the poet who works by square or line. Again

1. Southey, "Life and Works of Cowper", vol. I, p. 57
2. Cowper, "Dissertation on the Modern Ode", St. James Magazine, Apr., 1763.



the budding romanticist speaks - "I have with great pains drawn up certain infallible rules, whereby a student may learn to build the lofty Ode, with as much regularity, and as true mechanical principles, as a mason or a bricklayer erects a wall". The use of the rules and the content of them are both satirical glances at the neo-classicists in their close but unpenetrating copying of the classics. The first "grand rule" is that of Pathos - "In order to write pathetical . . . never trouble yourself to express the warm emotions of the feeling heart, but set together a large quantity of Oh's and Ah's! and introduce them as - thus - Ah well! Oh Thou!" The Greeks are noted as masters of pathetic expressions and the young poet is advised to include some Greek terms. By way of introduction to the "second great rule of Classicality" the student is advised to seem to know the ancients but not to trouble to consult them. In his criticism of contemporary odes one sees again the development of Cowper's feeling against the artificiality of the neo-classicists.

Yet however these gentlemen may have worn the garb of the ancients, I am far from charging them with any internal resemblance. They have indeed got their model in clay, but have stolen no beam of light to inform it.

Just as his youthful flair for the burlesque saw the flaws in neo-classicism's sham, it also saw the absurdities in



the excesses of the romantic pioneers. He recognized also that Milton was the source of many of the fine classical epithets. For the wording of the ode, the young poet was to note that it should have "Fountain and streak" and these must be "murmuring, querulous"; there must be a rill, a stone must be "mouldering," and "a Tower will take a very insignificant appearance that is not moss-grown as well as cloud-capt." His remarks on hyperbole seem to indicate that at this time he was not so fond of the tendency toward plain speech as he later became - "I need not caution any modern practitioners against it, as we in general are so fearful of knocking out our brains against the stars, that like geese, we even duck our heads under a barn-door". Alliteration he termed "the artificial all in all of poetry", which would off-set somewhat the seeming displeasure with plainness.<sup>1</sup>

From his later writing we have only one mention of the ode, and that would seem to indicate that his respect for the genre had never developed to any great degree. He writes - "in such matters we do not expect much novelty, or much depth of thought. The expression is all in all."<sup>2</sup>

#### ROMANTIC PIONEERS

##### Thomson

Cowper's opinion was in general agreement with that

1. Cowper, "Dissertation on Modern Ode," St. James Mag., Apr., 1765
2. To W. Unwin, Oct. 22, 1785



of other discerning critics of his day - "Thomson was admirable in description, but it always seemed to me that there was somewhat of affectation in his stile, and that his numbers are sometimes not well harmonized."<sup>1</sup>

### Gray

It may be remembered that the mock odes of the Nonsense Club were in part burlesques of those of Gray. Cowper recalls this when he discusses his early opinion of him, adding that he was prejudiced because Gray "did not belong to our Thursday Society & was an Eton man, which lowered his prodigiously in our Esteem". His maturer judgment of Gray was highly flattering - "I have been reading Greys works, and think him the only Poet since Shakespear entitled to the Character of Sublime."<sup>1</sup> This seems to us to be excessively high praise, and yet one finds that such praise was common in Cowper's day, except with Dr. Johnson. Indeed, the reviewers of Johnson's criticism were severe with him for his treatment of Gray. The "Monthly Review" for Feburary 1783 in its discussion of the matter gives indication of popular sentiment at the time -

The partial and uncandid mode of criticism adopted by Dr. Johnson in his Remarks on Gray, seems to have given general, and indeed just, offence to the numerous admirers of that exquisite poet.<sup>2</sup>

1. To Joseph Hill, Apr. 20, 1777

2. "The Monthly Review", Feb. 1783, Vol. 68, p. 186



## **Goldsmith**

Typical of the eighteenth century romanticist is Cowper's judgment of Goldsmith -

I have read Goldsmith's "Traveller" and his "Deserted Village", and am highly pleased with them both, as well for the manner in which they are executed, as for their tendency, and the lessons that they inculcate.<sup>1</sup>

## **Burns**

Cowper gave considerable time and effort to the reading of Burns' poems and praised Burns highly, but with reservations. He recognized Burns as an "extraordinary genius" and considered him to be remarkable in the facility with which he "rhymes and versifies in a kind of measure not in itself very easy to execute"; he thought him to have humour and good sense. But he could not get away from the idea that "his measure and his language are so terribly barbarous."<sup>2</sup> He wished Burns would get away from his "uncouth dialect" and thought many of his subjects to be inferior to the author's ability. As is so often the case with Cowper, an apt metaphor sums up the impression - "His candle is bright, but shut up in a dark lantern."<sup>3</sup> And though we have come to recognize the contribution of Burns, and he has achieved lasting and deserved fame, one needs only to attempt a first

1. To Lady Hesketh, Nov. 30, 1785

2. To Lady Hesketh, Apr. 12, 1788

3. To Samuel Rose, July 24, 1787



introduction of his work to young readers to appreciate the validity of Cowper's opinion that "he is not a pleasing poet to an English reader."<sup>1</sup> For our purposes, this estimate of Burns is one more item in the picture of Cowper as a moderate romanticist. He was impressed with the ability of Burns, but too reserved in his appreciations to be able to countenance the dialect for poetry or perhaps the devil as a poetic character.

To summarize, we find evidence aplenty for the title of classical romanticist, and at times a variant of it which might be "evangelical classicist". A Miltonic conception of the high calling of the poet is characterized by an evangelical interpretation of the classical idea of the poet as "vates", and this is colored by a romantic demand for fancy and fervency. The classic purpose of delighting in order to teach has gone completely evangelical, with some added interest in presenting the country as preferable to the city. In the matter of technique, individual genius is seen to need no prop of rules or of imitation, nor are these last a substitute for that genius. Neo-classic rules are as repulsive as are its trivialities of subject-matter or its repulsive subjects, and no ornateness of style can mend the situation. For true elegance is

1. To Lady Hesketh, Apr. 12, 1788



found only in simplicity. Close neighbor to the romantic plea for simplicity we find a classic devotion to quantitative prosody. Pastorals and odes when borrowed from the classics have not the appeal of the more native ballad. The romantic pioneers are in the main pleasing but not when they stray so far from the prescribed method as Burns. No group of critical opinions could be more free from the bias of a set of rules for judgment or a group of closely knit prejudices. The whole might be put in parallel columns and would strike a fairly even balance between classic reserve and romantic appreciation of individual genius.



## VI

## LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

If the casual reader gives any consideration to the poet Cowper as a translator, he probably confines himself to Cowper's translation of Homer. But this is by no means his only production of this sort. He translated a number of poems from the French of Madame le la Motte Guyon, the French pietist, translated from the Latin and the Italian poems of Milton, from the Latin of Vincent Bourne, and from the Latin and Greek classics. A few of the fables of Gay he translated from the English into Latin. Such a variety of experience in this field of endeavor should give him some claim to authority in the matter.

In general his statements regarding the values of the English language for poetic expression are made in connection with a discussion of the comparative values of various languages. Classicist that he is, he can never concede any modern language to be so fine as Latin or Greek. He finds any modern language deficient in majesty, in dignity, and in harmony by comparison with "the two best languages that ever were spoken, the Greek and the Latin".<sup>1</sup> Once having admitted that English shares with all other languages in being less musical than the Greek, he continues -

1. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 5, 1786



But it is musical enough for the purposes of melodious verse, and if it seem to fail, on whatever occasion, in energy, the blame is due, <sup>1</sup> not to itself, but to the unskilful manager of it.

To substantiate this opinion he cites the works of Milton either in verse or in prose as "abundant proof that no subject, however important, however sublime, can demand greater force of expression than is within the compass of the English language". His greatest trial in using the English language for poetry came from the particle "the". He felt that no other language was so burdened with this as ours; the classic languages had "no similar incumbrance of expression, and the French always take care that the particles be absorbed in the vowel immediately following them". This "abominable intruder", this "barbarism" is a trial to the poet for two reasons. It uses up a fifth of the normal ten syllable line of English verse and worse than that occasions open vowels when it precedes a word beginning with a vowel.<sup>2</sup> What to do in this case is a problem. Shall the poet melt the particle "into the substantive, or leave the 'hiatus' open? Both practices are offensive to a delicate ear. The particle absorbed occasions harshness, and the open vowel a vacuity equally inconvenient."<sup>3</sup> No adequate solution offers itself.

1. Cowper's Preface to Homer. Southey, "Works", vol.XI, pp. x-xi

2. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 5, 1786

3. Cowper's pref. to Homer. Southey, "Works", vol.XI, pp. xxii-xxiii



We have already noted the advance of French over English in the absorption of the extra syllable of the particle. Cowper also felt that the French language as a whole had some quality which he found admirable but untranslatable into English. He found difficulty in defining this quality, but in the works of Caracioli termed it "an air of pious and tender melancholy".<sup>1</sup> Although we unevangelical moderns would hardly use this term for the quality Cowper indicates, I think we understand his meaning. He refers, I believe, to that element in the French language which gives to such an expression as "Connais tu le pays?" a quality of wistfulness which is entirely lacking in the plain English "Do you know the country?" In discussing this Cowper writes -

This property of it, which depends perhaps altogether upon the arrangement of his words and the modulation of his sentences, it would be very difficult to preserve in a translation. I do not know that our language is capable of being so managed, and rather suspect that it is not, and that it is peculiar to the French, because it is not unfrequent among their writers, and I never saw any thing similar to it in our own.<sup>1</sup>

Much of Cowper's praise of the classical languages was lavished upon the Greek, but he felt the Latin also to be considerably above the English. He found in the Roman language a dignity which he felt to be an indication of the "good sense and masculine mind" of the people.

1. To John Newton, Mar. 19, 1784



whc spcke it. "The same thought which clothed in English seems childish, and even foolish, assumes a different air in Latin."<sup>1</sup> Again the classicist speaks in the following - "that is epigrammatic and witty in Latin which would be perfectly insipid in English".<sup>2</sup>

If Cowper's praise of the Latin seems strong, his adulation for the Greek falls little short of literary idolatry. Greek is "the best language ever used upon earth".<sup>3</sup> To put the matter more strongly, it is "the finest language that ever man uttered," and in comparison with it all other languages are but "*gibberish*".<sup>4</sup> English shares the fate of other modern languages in being less musical than the Greek - "our language, unless it be very severely chastised, has not the terseness, nor our measure the music, of the Greek".<sup>5</sup> This lack in the English is felt particularly in the translation of the transitions which though "easy and natural in the Greek" often turn out to be "intolerably awkward in an English version".<sup>6</sup>

Upon the ever recurring subject of translation Cowper takes, as one may expect, a middle ground. Neither servile exactness nor free paraphrase appeals to him. His

1. To W. Unwin, Apr. 27, 1782
2. To W. Unwin, May 23, 1781
3. To Walter Bagot, Jan. 5, 1788
4. To W. Unwin, June 12, 1785
5. To W. Unwin, Aug. 24, 1786
6. To Samuel Rose, Dec. 13, 1787



theories seem on the whole to be sound although they did not result in making him famous as a translator of Homer. He clearly points out the fallacy in a translation which attempts to transfuse the minutiae of one language into another -

Such extreme fidelity is in fact unfaithful; such close resemblance takes away all likeness. The original is elegant, easy, natural. The copy is clumsy, constrain'd unnatural. To what is this owing? to the adoption of terms not congenial to your purpose, and of a context such as no man writing an original work, would make use of.<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind, Cowper presents his argument for freedom in translation - that is, freedom of expression, "freedom so limited as never to leave behind the matter, but at the same time indulged with a sufficient scope to secure the Spirit and as much as possible of the manner."<sup>1</sup> This he found much easier to describe than to achieve. He felt that a qualified translator is so steeped in his original as to be dyed to the bone with its characteristic color and then, "distinguishing between what is essentially Greek and what may be habited in English, rejects the former and is faithful to the latter as far as the purposes of fine poetry will permit, and no farther."<sup>1</sup> But when his own translation was criticized for its un-English syntax, he could account for the blemish in no other way

1. To Wm. Hayley, Jan. 5, 1794



than by supposing himself to be "after such long and close study of the original, infected to the very bond with Grecian manner of misarrangement."<sup>1</sup>

Although Cowper preferred a certain freedom in translation he by no means approved paraphrase, especially with such freedom as he found in Pope. Such a translator, who would "suppress the sense" of the original and put in his own could be said to have produced an imitation or possibly a paraphrase, but certainly not a translation. For his production would no longer be "the same author only in a different dress, and therefore it is not translation".<sup>2</sup>

Cowper frequently states his preference for a middle ground between servile fidelity to the original and loose freedom. He feels that the former loses the spirit, whereas the latter loses the sense, the style and manner, and the characteristic peculiarities of the original.

Were it possible, therefore, to find an exact medium, a manner so close that it should let slip nothing of the text, nor mingle any thing extraneous with it, and at the same time so free as to have an air of originality, this seems precisely the mode in which an author might be best rendered.<sup>2</sup>

To this statement of the ideal, Cowper adds an assurance that the discovery of such a middle way is difficult and the following of it when discovered is well nigh impossible, especially in the translation of such a voluminous writer as Homer.

1. To Thomas Hayley, Mar. 14, 1793

2. Cowper's Pref. to Homer, Southey, "Works," vol. XI, p. ix



Naturally one could hardly expect Cowper to approve rime for translation, for the use of rime could in no way adjust itself to this middle ground. The fidelity which he considered to be "the very essence of translation" could not be preserved when the writer is under the compulsion of rimed couplets. Whereas in an original work the author may adjust his sense to the necessity of rime, "in a translation ~~he~~<sup>1</sup> such option is allowable; the sense of the author is required".

This riming had much to do with the deficiencies of Pope as a translator of Homer. This we shall consider more at length in a later chapter; suffice it to say at this point that Pope was rejected as being hardly worthy of the name of imitator so completely had he misinterpreted the spirit and even the sense of his original. That Cowper had considerable justification for this opinion may be seen in the opinions of such critics as Bentley and Matthew Arnold.

Another translator of Homer who fared ill at Cowper's hands is Chapman. Keats's sonnet, with its praise of bearing "Chapman speak out loud and bold," has conditioned us to think of this translation as superior. Cowper did not find it so, but wondered that one "with so little taste for Homer, or apprehension of his manner" should

1. Cowper's Preface to Homer, Soutney, "Works", vol.XI, p. ix



undertake the task of translation. In passages to which Cowper gave particular attention, he found Chapman "giving a sense of his own, not at all warranted by the words of Homer."<sup>1</sup> Cowper seemed unable to tolerate any adulteration of Homer to suit the taste of the age in which the translator lived. He seemed never to appreciate this adjustment as being the underlying cause of both Pope's and Chapman's deviation from their original. Matthew Arnold in his "On Translating Homer" agrees with Cowper's condemnation of both Pope and Chapman but is more particular in his indication of the difficulty involved.<sup>2</sup> As an example of the inaccuracies of interpretation into which Chapman's Elizabethan luxuriance of expression leads him, Matthew Arnold quotes the Greek which literally would translate "For well I know this in my mind and in my heart, the day will be, when sacred Troy shall perish" as being translated by Chapman - "And such a stormy day shall come, in mind and soul I know, When sacred Troy shall shed her towers, for tears of overthrow."<sup>3</sup> No wonder Cowper could find no other term for such a translation than "a curiosit".<sup>1</sup>

1. To Thos. Park, July 15, 1793

2. "But as eminently as Homer is plain, so eminently is the Elizabethan literature in general, and Chapman in particular, fanciful. Steeped in humours and fantasticality up to its very lips . . . in dealing with works of profane literature, in dealing with poetical works above all, which highly stimulated them, one may say that the minds of the Elizabethan translators were too active; that they could not forbear importing so much of their own, and this of a most peculiar and Elizabethan character, into their original, that they effaced the character of the original itself." M. Arnold, "On Translating Homer", pp. 54-5  
<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-9. Underlining is Arnold's.



These criticisms of other translations are by no means given because of a sense of superiority on Cowper's part. On one occasion when he described the ideal translator, he added, "I do not pretend to be that man myself".<sup>1</sup> In fact, his early experiences with translation were distasteful to him, for he found it "disagreeable to work by another man's pattern."<sup>2</sup> However, his devotion to Homer, and his conviction that Milton's manner was the best for translation, seem to have reconciled him to the task. At any rate, once committed to the following of Homer's pattern, he declared, "My ambition is to produce the closest copy possible, and at the same time as harmonious as I know how to make it."<sup>3</sup>

Successful as he was in writing original descriptions, Cowper found great difficulty in reproducing the minute descriptions of Homer while at the same time preserving the dignity that he felt proper to the poet. Innumerable homely details were made poetic by the purity of diction in Homer and by the advantage which he had in the Greek language. But "it is difficult to kill a sheep with dignity in a modern language"<sup>4</sup>, and so we return to the limitations of our language for the reproduction of the majesty of Homer. A glance at Pope no doubt called

1. To Wm. Hayley, Jan. 5, 1794

2. To Wm. Unwin, May 23, 1781

3. To Walter Bagot, Jan. 5, 1783

4. Cowper's pref. to Homer. Southey, "Works", vol. XI, pp. xv-xvii



forth the statement that "to paraphrase him loosely, to hang him with trappings that do not belong to him, all this is comparatively easy." But Cowper meant to "represent him with only his own ornaments and still to preserve his dignity" although he knew that he had undertaken an arduous task.

He seemed quite unaware of the fact that his own cut-lock was as much colored by prejudice as that of Pope or of Chapman. Whereas they each dressed Homer in the attire of their own period, I make no doubt that Matthew Arnold is correct in his assertion that Cowper dressed him in a manner unduly influenced by that of Milton. Arnold's most penetrating definition of the distinction between Homer in the original and Homer in Cowper's Miltonic version is his statement, "The best model of the grand style simple is Homer; perhaps the best model of the grand style severe is Milton."<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, Cowper seems strongly classical in his admiration for the Latin and Greek in preference to any modern language. On the other hand, the hide-bound classicist would see no good whatever in English as a language for poetic expression, whereas Cowper defends it for energy and the capability of melody. His middle ground in the matter of translation is essentially classical when considered in relation to the fondness for

1. Arnold, "On Translating Homer", p. 158



paraphrase characteristic of English translators in general. His opposition to the neo-classic ornamentation of Pope is more classical in this case than it is romantic, for the fault he finds is not so much with Pope's manner as such (although he criticizes it elsewhere surely on its own merits) as it is with the liberties he has taken with the original. On this occasion our classical romanticist is seen as influenced chiefly by enthusiasm for the subject matter of the classics , but in his devotion to the original classics rather than to notions about them or opinions drawn from them he is so opposite to the neo-classicists as to be in this roundabout way a romanticist.



VII  
HOMER

Paradoxically enough there is nothing more truly romantic about Cowper than his admiration for the classics. As I mentioned at the close of the preceding chapter, his devotion was not one of word only but an actuality. He was no neo-classic worshipper of doctrines built upon originals which he had never consulted. It is not strange that we frequently find in his writings combined references to the classics and to Scripture. Just as his religious convictions were based on evangelical individualism which allowed each to interpret the Scriptures to his own salvation (damnation in Cowper's case), so his literary convictions were based upon romantic individualism which allowed and expected each to interpret the classics to his own literary betterment. Cowper appears unique among critics of his period in having no use for neo-classic rules nor for the results in their writings of the application of those rules, and yet in being infinitely more devoted to those same classics than these whom he must have looked upon as false prophets in the realm of letters.

Cowper's particular devotion was for Homer. He might have deserved the name of conologist, especially



when one considers that it was the plainness of Homer that he admired, were it not that those to whom that name was applied usually admired Homer to the exclusion of Virgil. Such was not the case with Cowper. Although his expressions of admiration for Virgil are infrequent, they are none the less enthusiastic and are not characterized by the setting of Virgil in contrast to Homer which onologists were prone to indulge in. He writes, "Homer and Virgil have enjoyed . . . . an unrivaled reputation as Poets through a long succession of Ages."<sup>1</sup>

Cowper commends Virgil for his variety, and on one occasion expresses the opinion that a critic who can find no beauties in Virgil must be "of all creatures that live, the most destitute of taste and sensibility."<sup>2</sup> Indicative of the romantic quality of Cowper's appreciation of Virgil is his defense of that poet against Blair's criticism that he included details that were too common in a certain description of a thunder storm. Cowper declared himself unable "to conceive that wind and rain can be improper in the description of a tempest, or how wind and rain could possibly be more poetically described" and added that only Virgil could have done justice to the shower in a single epithet.<sup>3</sup> We find in Cowper no mention of ornateness in Virgil as contrasted with the simplicity which

1. To J. Newton, Nov. 5, 1785

2. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 22, 1785

3. To Wm. Unwin, Apr. 25, 1784



he so much admired in Homer, but it seems likely that something of this sort is the reason behind his greater admiration for Homer.<sup>1</sup>

We have previously noted Cowper's disgust with higher criticism and its results, in judgment of which he declares, "The vanity of human attainments was never so conspicuously exemplified."<sup>2</sup> No product of these efforts aroused him more than the questioning of the authorship of Homer's poems. He had, of course, no use for Villoison and his theories. The evidence which Villoison included for his claims in his "Prolegomena" Cowper termed "pretty stories" and said ironically that they made his hair stand on end "they so terribly affect in point of authenticity the credit of the works of the immortal Homer".<sup>3</sup> Even if the poems were handed down by word of mouth, as Cowper did not doubt they were, it seemed unlikely to him that

1. Addison points out the distinction very effectively. "Reading the Iliad, is like traveling through a country uninhabited, where the fancy is entertained with a thousand savage prospects of vast deserts, wide uncultivated marshes, huge forests, mis-shapen rocks and precipices. On the contrary, the Aeneid is like a well-ordered garden, where it is impossible to find out any part unadorned, or to cast our eyes upon a single spot that does not produce some beautiful plant or flower." "The Spectator", no. 417, Saturday, June 28, 1712.

2. To John Newton, Nov. 5, 1785

3. To Walter Bagot, n.d.



Pisastratus who was said to be the collector could be so imposed upon as to include in the group a great many which were not Homer's as Villcison seemed to think had happened. Surely a difference of style and manner would have aroused suspicion, and then detection would have been possible. When Villcison quoted Callimachus in proof that Homer was imperfectly understood in his day, Cowper felt that such a poet as Callimachus, who was an adoring imitator of Homer, could have meant only that there is an allegorical meaning behind Homer's obvious one. Cowper made no claim to an understanding of this allegory, but felt that his positing it had solved the difficulty. Whereupon he proceeded to anathematize Villcison as follows - "Ab eas ergo in malem rem cum istis tuis hallucinationibus, Villuisone!"<sup>1</sup>

Bentley's suggestion that Homer did not compose the whole last book of the *Odyssey* he would not accept but was glad to agree that Homer probably did not write the concluding incidents - "The battle with which the book concludes is, I think, a paltry battle, and there is a huddle in the management of it altogether unworthy of my favourite, and the favourite of all ages."<sup>2</sup> One who knows this portion of the *Odyssey*, though only in translation, is inclined to sympathize with Cowper for wishing to relegate

1. To Walter Baget, n.d.

2. To Samuel Rose, Feb. 2, 1790



it to some other writer instead of attempting to find some way to justify its glaring defects.

Cowper's answer to the entire controversy is, as we have previously indicated, hardly in the manner of higher criticism. However, when one carefully considers the full import of its irony, one finds there the best answer that common sense can give to fine-spun conjecture based on probabilities and arriving at more probabilities.

It is now shrewdly suspected that Homer did not compose the poems for which he has been so long applauded . . . I fear that Homers case is desperate. after the lapse of so many generations it would be a difficult matter to elucidate a question which time and modern ingenuity together combine to puzzle. and I suppose that it were in vain for an honest plain man to enquire, if Homer did not write the Iliad and Odyssey, who did?

It is evident that Cowper had no question in his mind on the matter, or at least that having decided to call the author Homer, he could proceed to eulogize him for his accomplishments. "The Immortal Homer"<sup>2</sup>, "sublimest poet in the world",<sup>3</sup> "everything that a poet should be"<sup>4</sup> - all of these titles seem proper. Even in his published preface, after having declared that he

1. To J. Newton, Nov. 5, 1795

2. To Walter Bagot, n.d.

3. To Walter Bagot, Aug. 2, 1791

4. To Wm. Hayley, Jan. 5, 1794



will refrain from praise of Homer lest he be "liable to a suspicion of dotage" he launches into such a paean as a psalmist might address to a deity.

He has been the wonder of all countries that his works have ever reached, even deified by the greatest names of antiquity, and in some places actually worshipped. And to say truth, were it possible that mere man could entitle himself by pre-eminence of any kind to divine honours, Homer's astonishing powers seem to have given him the best pretensions.<sup>1</sup>

The Iliad and the Odyssey were "two of the finest poems that ever were composed by man,"<sup>2</sup> and the ninth book of the Iliad was "one of the most consummate efforts of genius handed down to us from antiquity."<sup>3</sup>

In the light of the foregoing, it seemed hardly necessary for Cowper to declare as he did that he was "one of Homers most enraptured admirers."<sup>4</sup> He perhaps had more reason to add, as he did, "I am not a blind one."<sup>4</sup> This statement is followed by a characteristic condemnation of those who are so blind in their admiration of Homer that they are determined to consider his work faultless. Such an attitude would border on injudicious neo-classicism. To prove that he is not in this class Cowper writes -

1. Cowper's pref. to Homer, Southey, "Works", v. XI, p. xvii
2. To Wm. Unwin, June 12, 1785
3. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 11, 1786
4. To Walter Bagot, July 4, 1786



I discover inadvertencies not a few; some perhaps that have escaped even the Commentators themselves, or perhaps in the enthusiasm of their idolatry, they resolved that they should pass for beauties. Homer, however, say what they will, was Man, and in all the works of man, especially in a work of such length and variety, many things will of necessity occur that might have been better . . . .<sup>1</sup>

More distressing than mere inadvertencies was the repulsive subject-matter in which Homer was apt to indulge himself. The thirteenth book of the Iliad was so replete with this that Cowper said of it . "It is woeful work, and were the best poet in the world to give us at this day such a List of Killed and wounded, he would not escape universal censure."<sup>1</sup> He could not refrain from expressing a wish that Homer had "applied his wonderful powers to a less disgusting subject."<sup>2</sup>

Cowper was clearly conscious of the heathen background of Homer and felt it necessary on occasion to defend Homer's value in a Christian society. One is not surprised to find that these defenses are in letters to the Rev. John Newton. Cowper writes of Homer as a "blameless writer" in point of purity and one in whose poems may be found "many great and valuable truths".<sup>2</sup>

1. To Walter Bagot, July 4, 1786. His literal translation of some of this, found in this same letter, explains his disgust with three weeks of concentration on - "letting out one man's bowels, smiting another through the gullet, transfixing the liver of another, and lodging an arrow in the buttock of a fourth." Dec. 3, 1785

2. To J. Newton, Dec. 3, 1785



In a later letter he even goes so far as to suggest Homer as a source for sermon material. In him might be found "exemplars of the pride, the arrogance, and the insignificance of man", a belief in "divine interposition", emphasis on the "duty of Charity toward the Poor and Stranger" and on the "necessity of prayer and piety toward the Gods." If one is surprised at Cowper's overlooking the heathen aspect of the plural deity, a greater surprise will be found in his final suggestion - "thousands who will not learn from Scripture to ask a blessing either on their actions or on their food, may learn it if they please from Homer."<sup>1</sup>

Such praise as the above seems rather worked up for the occasion. Cowper's praise was most genuine and spontaneous when it was concerned with Homer as a poet. Above all, his romantic appreciation was lavished upon Homer's "majestic plainness"<sup>2</sup>, his ability to produce "the sublime that owes its very existence to simplicity."<sup>3</sup> He never "in a single instance sacrificed beauty to embellishment,"<sup>2</sup> writes Cowper, with a glance at such neoclassicists as might presume to declare Homer their model. To state his merits compactly, "In Homer we find accuracy without ostentation, sublimity without labor."<sup>4</sup> Numerous

1. To J. Newton, June 24, 1791

2. To Lady Hesketh, Jan. 2, 1786

3. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785

4. Cowper's essay on Pope's translation of Homer, "Gentleman's Magazine", vol. LV, part 2, London, Aug., 1785.



other restatements of Cowper's praise for Homer's simplicity might be quoted. Some are combined with admiration for his descriptive power. Here again Cowper's appreciation is a romantic one. He uses phraseology equivalent to the neo-classicist's "truth to nature", and yet one feels that he speaks rather as one who praises faithfulness in the unadorned description of common things. Cowper is impressed with Homer's ability to retain his sublimity and grandeur while at the same time treating his subject with "the minuteness of a Flemish painter".<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this is possible because "his exquisite judgment never, never failed him."<sup>1</sup> Even more significant is Homer's abstention from the use of hyperbole, "accordingly, when he describes nature, whether in man or in animal, or whether nature inanimate,<sup>2</sup> you may always trust him for the most consummate fidelity."<sup>2</sup> Add to this the fact that no one has excelled Homer "in nice discriminations of character"<sup>3</sup> and the picture of the perfect poet is well nigh complete.

It is possible that Cowper read some of his own technical preferences into the work of Homer. For example some critics disagreed faintly with Cowper's claim that the caesuras in his own blank verse translation were

1. Cowper's pref. to Homer. Southey, "Works", vol. XI, p. xvii

2. To Lady Hesketh, Jane. 2, 1786

3. Cowper's essay on Pope's Homer, "Gentleman's Magazine" vol. LV, part 2, London, Aug. 1785



warranted by similar pauses in the original. In answering these critics Cowper declared, in the preface of his second edition of Homer, that the pauses in Homer were "frequent and various" and added that "it may even be questioned if a single passage of ten lines flowing with uninterrupted smoothness could be singled out."<sup>1</sup> A knowledge of Homer based entirely on translation does not qualify the writer to make a decision in this matter. However, it seems barely possible that Cowper's enthusiasm for Milton's blank verse style may have carried over into his interpretation of Homer's manner and so have colored his opinion on this point.

In the preface to his first edition of Homer, Cowper writes of the similitude of manner between Milton and Homer -

It is such, that no person familiar with both, can read either without being reminded of the other; and it is in those breaks and pauses, to which the numbers of the English poet are so much indebted both for their dignity and variety, that he chiefly owes the Grecian.<sup>2</sup>

But Matthew Arnold does not agree; he feels that in expressing such an opinion Cowper demonstrates how greatly he "misconceived the manner of Homer". In Arnold's opinion -

It would be more true to say: 'the unlikeness of Milton's manner to that of Homer is such that no person familiar with both can read either without

1. Southey, "Works", vol. XI, pp. xix-xx

2. Ibid., pp. xii-xiii



being struck with the difference from the other; and it is in his breaks and pauses that the English poet is most unlike the Grecian.<sup>1</sup>

Addison's observation of the influence of Homer on Milton seems not to refute Arnold's contention. For Addison feels that Milton copied Homer "in the length of his periods, the copiousness of his phrases, and the running of his verses into one another."<sup>2</sup>

Whether or not Cowper's judgment is correct is a question which need not be settled for our purposes. What is significant is the fact that Cowper's admiration for Homer is based on an independent appreciation of such elegant simplicity and fidelity to nature as would characterize a romanticist. The Miltonic element serves only to strengthen the picture of Cowper as a puritanical, evangelical, classical romanticist.

1. M. Arnold, "On Translating Homer", p. 45

2. Addison, Spectator No. 285



## VIII

## WILTON

The classical Cowper was no more enthusiastic about Homer than the religious Cowper was about Wilton. In fact his declaration that his "veneration for our Great Countryman" was equal to what he felt for Homer is an understatement, for the Christian element in Wilton's work led Cowper to venerate him even more than he did Homer. Here the Christian enthusiasm frequently overcomes the classical and we have to remind ourselves of Cowper's lavish praise of Homer on other occasions lest he appear beside his Christian counterpart as little more than a second-rate heathen.

We have previously noted Cowper's defense to John Newton of the Christian values in Homer. When his energies were focused on the editing of Wilton no such manufactured defense was necessary. Cowper's statement of this is indicative of the degree to which the Christianity of the poet contributed to Cowper's admiration for him -

His two principal poems are of a kind that call for an Editor who believes the Gospel and is well grounded in all Evangelical doctrine. Such an editor they have never had yet . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Together with evangelical qualifications, Cowper had the added advantage of having been for years a close student

1. To J. Newton, Feb. 20, 1792



of Milton - "Few people have studied Milton more, or  
are more familiar with his poetry, than myself . . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Such a close study had aroused in Cowper such an admiration for Milton as man and poet that he could tolerate no adverse criticism of his life or his writings.

He spoke of Milton as one "whose very name I reverence,"<sup>2</sup> "perhaps chief of all, who have done honour to our country,"<sup>3</sup> and was anxious for the publication of Hayler's *Life of Milton* "because impatient to have the spotless credit of the great poet's character, as a man and a citizen, vindicated as it ought to be . . . ."<sup>3</sup>

One who had made this vindication necessary was Thomas Warton who had accused Milton of being so narrow-minded as to repent of a compliment paid to the memory of Bishop Andrews. For this Cowper was ready to beat Warton, for it was Cowper's opinion that "Milton's mind could not be narrowed by anything" and that his quarrel with the Church of England would in no way prejudice him against any good man even if he were connected with that church."<sup>4</sup>

1. To Clotworthy Rowley, Oct. 22, 1791

2. To Wm. Hayley, Mar. 17, 1792

3. To Wm. Hayley, Nov. 22, 1793

4. To Walter Bagot, Oct. 25, 1791. Coleridge is in agreement with Cowper on this point. He writes of Milton, "He reserved his anger for enemies of religion, freedom and his country . . . . From others only, do we derive our knowledge that Milton, in his latter day, had his scorners and detractors; and even in his day of youth and hope, that he had enemies would have been unknown to us, and they not been likewise the enemies of his country." "Biographia Literaria", p. 19



But a worse sinner against the honor of Milton was Dr. Johnson. In a later chapter we shall consider at greater length the differences between Cowper and Dr. Johnson. Both were prejudice-driven and consciously blind toward what they did not wish to see. Cowper feels that Johnson has been too severe with Milton's private life; he admits "some scurness of temper" as the only vice with which Milton's memory can be charged, and is sure that if there had been any other Johnson would certainly not have spared him.<sup>1</sup>

In his criticisms of Milton's poetry Cowper seemed determined to find differences with Dr. Johnson. Cowper himself declared the subject-matter of the early Latin elegies to be "almost too puerile" though the versification seemed "equal to the best of Ovid."<sup>2</sup> Yet he was prepared to do battle with Dr. Johnson for his verdict on them, which condemns them no more severely than to say that they are -

lusciously elegant; but the delight which they afford is rather by the exquisite imitation of the ancient writers, by the purity of the diction, and the harmony of the numbers, than by any power of invention, or vigour of sentiment.<sup>3</sup>

A similar determinel difference is found in the opinion of

1. To W. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779

2. To Samuel Rose, Oct. 30, 1791

3. Johnson's Life of Milton, vol. IX of complete works, p. 152



these two critics on "Epitaphium Damonis". Cowper condemns Johnson's criticism that the poem was "written with the common but childish imitation of pastoral life".<sup>1</sup> Yet on another occasion Cowper admits this same style to be ridiculous enough. When Cowper praises the poem as being "a pastoral . . . equal to any of Virgil's Bucolics" one somehow feels that he is praising it as a technical achievement rather than intending any praise to those bucolics, the artificialities of which must always have seemed to him ridiculous. He does not discuss at length "I'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" but mentions having been charmed with them as a boy, and "never never wearying of them".<sup>2</sup>

Cowper's greatest quarrel was perhaps with Johnson's opinion of *Lycidas*, and later critics have been fairly consistent in seconding Cowper's objections. Johnson seems entirely incapable of appreciating the pastoral imagery of the poem and surely can find few to agree with him when he writes -

Though it be allowed that the representation may be allegorical, the true meaning is so uncertain and remote, that it is never sought, because it cannot be known when it is found.<sup>3</sup>

What Cowper admires as "the classical spirit of antiquity"<sup>4</sup>

1. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 95

2. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 17, 1782

3. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 154

4. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779



Johnson derides as "a long train of mythological imagery, such as a college easily supplies".<sup>1</sup> This seems a little tinged with envy of Milton's superior training in the classics. Johnson makes no mention of "the liveliness of description, the sweetness of the numbers" which Cowper finds so delightful.<sup>2</sup>

On *Paradise Lost* Cowper and Johnson had many similar ideas although one could hardly say they agreed. Cowper seemed to ignore the favorable opinions which Johnson expressed and to concentrate only on the unfavorable, such as his opinion of blank verse. (From this point on we shall give little attention to Johnson or to Cowper's differences with him.) Much of Cowper's commendatory criticism of Milton is found in his unfinished commentary on *Paradise Lost*. He said upon beginning this work that he was comforted by the thought that he wrote "what nobody will ever read," but accounted it "no small disgrace to us English that being natives of a country that has produced the finest poem in the world, so few or us ever look into it."<sup>3</sup>

1. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 154

2. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 51, 1779

3. To Wm. Hayley, May 9, 1791. Dr. Johnson perhaps explains this neglect when, after high praise of the poem, he writes, "We read Milton for instruction, retire harassed and overburdened, and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master, and seek for companions." Johnson's *Life of Milton* p. 173



At the outset we see the evangelical to the fore in Cowper's commentaries. The "exordium of this noble Poem"— "And justify the ways of God to men" — has a "solemnity of sentiment" and "majesty of numbers" which has no example in the works of the ancients.

The sublimest of all subjects was reserved for Milton, and bringing to the contemplation of that subject . . . a genius equal to the best of theirs . . . it is no wonder that he has produced a composition, on the whole, superior to any that we have received from former ages.

This is followed by praise of "the harmony of the numbers," "dignity of his expression" and "sublimity of his conceptions." "His judgment controls his genius . . . he addresses himself to the performance of great things, but makes no great exertion in doing it; a sure symptom of uncommon vigor."<sup>1</sup> His characterization of the music of the poem is fitting for the work of the poet we have come to know as the organ voice —

It is like that of a fine organ; has the fullest and the deepest tones of majesty, with all the softness and elegance of the Dorian flute. Variety without end and never equalled, unless, perhaps, by Virgil.<sup>2</sup>

A bone of contention among critics of *Paradise Lost* has long been the allegorical figures of Sin and Death. Addison thinks such allegory unsuited to an epic poem because the figures have "a chimerical existence" which

1. Cowper on "Paradise Lost", Southey, "Works", v. XV, pp. 297-8  
 2. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779



has not sufficient "measure of probability" for this type of writing.<sup>1</sup> In answer to this Cowper cites a famous allegory of Homer's, *Iliad* IX, line 498, and Virgil's in *Aeneid* VI, line 273, leaving the decision on the matter to "those who can persuade themselves to part with an exquisite beauty, for the sake of a slight, indeed a fanciful objection."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Johnson writes, "This unskillful allegory appears to me one of the greatest faults of the poem."<sup>3</sup> His difficulty was in having such figurative personages construct a real bridge through chaos. This seems all to be a matter of opinion, or perhaps of ability to resign oneself to belief. Coleridge finds no trouble in granting belief to Milton's creations. Cowper finds added poetic lustre in the very "ambiguous nature" of Milton's conception of Death -

A kind of intermediate form between matter and spirit, partaking of both, and consisting of neither. The idea of its substance is lost in its tenuity, and yet, contemplated a while as a shadow, it becomes a substance.<sup>5</sup>

Cowper makes a telling point in his comment on Milton's naming his personification of chaos, "Anarch", pointing out the added emphasis gained in the picture of him as the "king of all confusion".<sup>6</sup>

1. Addison, "Spectator", No. 273

2. Cowper on "Paradise Lost", Southey, "Works", v. XV, p. 325

3. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 176

4. Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria", pp. 242-3

5. Cowper on "Paradise Lost", Southey, "Works", v. XV, pp. 323-4

6. Ibid., p. 328



Cowper was frequently impressed with the similarities between Milton and Homer. As has been pointed out, Matthes Arnold disagrees with him in the matter of variation of pause, and perhaps justly so. However, Addison has noted the similarity between the two, and when we add to this Johnson's statement that Milton "could almost repeat"<sup>1</sup> Homer, we may feel that Cowper was not straining the point in finding so many similarities as he did between the two. He notes numerous single lines for similarity of phraseology, and occasionally a whole idea similar in conception and in presentation, not infrequently indicating a superiority in the work of Milton. Such superiority he sees in Milton's description of Beelzebub (beginning Book I, line 300) when he arises to address the assembly. He considers this to be "such as no writer of antiquity ever equalled," and declares that after comparison with Ovid's Ajax or Homer's Ulysses in similar circumstances "you will not hesitate a moment to give the praise to the English poet."<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to determine in cases like this whether Cowper is swayed most by classicism or by evangelical enthusiasm for the Christian subject-matter of Milton. In most cases he explains that the superior grandeur of Milton is made possible by his subject.

1. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 145

2. Cowper of "Paradise Lost", Southey, "Works", vol. XV, pp. 316-17.



On the other hand, Milton's subject could never weight his poetic flight. Cowper demonstrates this in his criticism of the speech ending with line 134, Book III. In this speech God the Father is explaining the doctrine of freedom of the will as related to the fall of man and the divine mercy. Naturally Cowper is prejudiced in favor of the doctrines set forth, yet an unprejudiced reader can agree in general with his estimate of the speech's composition, which he considers to be "as unexceptionable as the matter of it."

The expressions are nervous, and notwithstanding the abstruseness of the subject, beautifully clear. The lines are also harmonious, nor is the great poet less apparent in such a passage as this than in the most flowery description. Let it be tried by Horace's rule; divest it of measure, cast the words into their natural order, do what you please with it, you can never make it prose.<sup>1</sup>

That readers in general would agree in pronouncing Milton "the best writer of blank verse" Cowper made no doubt, but he had likewise found frequent criticisms of the very elisions which he considered to be in a large degree responsible for "the divine harmony of Milton's numbers".<sup>2</sup> That he was not alone in his estimate of the value of these elisions is testified by Addison who notes, as Cowper has, Milton's cutting of a "y" before a vowel. Of this practice

1. Cowper on "P.L.", Southey, "Works", vol. XV, p. 333

2. To Walter Bagot, Aug. 31, 1786



he writes -

This and some other innovations in the measure of his verse; has varizd his numbers in such a manner, as makes them incapable of satiating the ear, and cloying the reader, which the same uniform measure would certainly have done, and which the perpetual returns of rhyme never fail to do in long narrative poems.<sup>1</sup>

Where Addison speaks of Milton's having "variei his numbers" Cowper would point out the manipulation of pause to which he says the "numbers" of Milton are indebted for "dignity and variety".<sup>2</sup> In line with this is Milton's use of rough and irregular lines, sometimes "where the sense recommends it" as in the description of Hell as "abominable, unutterable, and worse" and also "as foils to the rest" and "to relieve the ear . . . from the tedium of an unvaried and perpetual smoothness."<sup>3</sup>

In the treatment of the language of Milton, Cowper, oddly enough, is rather at variance with Addison whereas his opinion on the point of grammar coincides with that of Dr. Johnson. Cowper notes that Milton never transgresses grammatical propriety, "but for the sake of an advantage more equivalent"<sup>4</sup> and cites convincing examples. Dr. Johnson in commenting on Bentley's citation of "verbal

1. Addison, "Spectator", no. 285

2. Cowper's pref. to Homer. "Works", vol. XI, pp. xii-xiii

3. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 20, 1786

4. Cowper on "Paradise Lost". "Works", vol. XV, p. 314



inaccuracies" in Paralise Lost adjudges that critic "perhaps better skilled in grammar than in poetry" and says of the inaccuracies that Bentley "sometimes made them" where he claimed to have found them.<sup>1</sup> In language and diction Cowper claims that Milton "is never quaint, never twangs through the nose, but is every where grand and elegant, without resorting to musty antiquity for his beauties."<sup>2</sup> But Addison terms his language "often too much laboured, and sometimes obscured by old words, transpositions, and foreign idioms."<sup>3</sup> Which of these general evaluations is the more just is again a matter of opinion. However, when Cowper claims that Milton "took a long stride forward, left the language of his own day far behind him"<sup>2</sup> he has the advantage of proof on his side. With this idea in mind he notes of Paradise Lost, Book II, line 122 - "To cast Ominous conjecture" -

New combinations in language, or in other words, the invention of new phrases, is an argument of great ability in a writer, and few have furnished more instances of this than Milton.<sup>4</sup>

To my mind, Cowper is justified in his claim that Milton's works demonstrate the possibilities of the English language in "force of expression" and presentation

1. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 171
2. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 22, 1790
3. Addison, "Spectator" no. 297
4. Works, vol. XV, p. 313



of the sublime.<sup>1</sup> Both his prose and his verse are ample proof that he found no limitation in English as a means of expression. But Addison's classicism was too much tinged with neo-classicism for him to admit of such a possibility, much as he admired Milton. It was his opinion that Milton's epic was deterred from equalling the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid* "rather from the fault of the language in which it is written than from any defect of genius in the author."<sup>2</sup> The simile he uses to illustrate his point is vivid but by no means a compliment to the English language.<sup>3</sup>

This drawback in language seemed to Addison to be the reason why Milton might fall short of the ancients in the matter of imagination, otherwise he would name him "a perfect master in all these arts of working on the imagination".<sup>2</sup> Cowper recognized no such drawback, and felt free to compare the products of Milton's imagination with those of the ancients, to the greater glory of Milton. Readers have for generations marveled at the cosmography which Milton devised for his epic, and commentators have exhausted the language of encomium on the concrete imagination which he displayed in the vast conceptions. Cowper joins the many in his praise of the imaginative genius

1. Cowper's pref. to Homer. "Works", vol. XI, p. xi

2. Addison, "Spectator" no. 417

3. "So divine a poem in English, is like a stately palace built of brick, where one may see architecture in as great a perfection as one of marble, though the materials are of a coarser nature. "Spectator" no. 417



displayed in the conception of Hell.

Of all the articles, of which the dreadful scenery of Milton's Hell consists, Scripture furnished him only with a lake of fire and brimstone. Yet, thus slenderly assisted, what a world of woe has he constructed by the force of an imagination, proved, in this single instance,<sup>1</sup> the most creative that ever poet owned!

In further commendation, Cowper once more places Milton above the ancients - "His description of Hell is not only a man, but a natural history of it, and the hells of Homer and Virgil are even comfortable compared with this."<sup>2</sup> Again Milton is seen as superior to Homer in the description of the battle of the fallen angels. He cites the greater effectiveness of cherubin as against puny mortals, of rebellion against the Almighty rather than against a created being, and of swords of fire rather than swords which flame metaphorically. And these swords "flash not by reflection of the sun-beams like the swords of Homer, but their own light, and that light plays not idly on broad day, but far round illuminates hell."<sup>3</sup> Once more he mentions Milton's "happiness to have fallen on a subject that furnished such scenery, and such characters to act in it" but adds that this would have been no happiness to "a genius inferior to Milton's".

1. Cowper, "Works", vol. XV, p. 300

2. Ibid., p. 322

3. Ibid., p. 310



One hardly needs to point out, in the light of this and the preceding chapter, that when Cowper admires a writer he makes no reservations. If literature were a religion and had a heaven, Homer and Milton would be the reigning deities, equal in power, glory, and sublimity, and worshiped unceasingly by at least one votary. Cowper finds in Milton all that he admires in a man, all that he finds worthy of praise in a poet - both in subject-matter and in technique. In his appreciation of the "classical antiquity" of Milton, he is more classical than Dr. Johnson; in his appreciation of the language and imagery he has advanced beyond the neo-classicism of Addison; in his appreciation of the religious element he is an eighteenth century evangelical enthusiast. The combination of devotion to Homer, to classical antiquity, to the English language, and to evangelical fervor is appropriate and to be expected in a classical romanticist.



## IX

## POPE

One might almost continue the figurative language with which the preceding chapter concluded by saying that if literature were a religion and Milton and Homer equal deities, then Pope and his works would be renounced as the Devil and all his works. At any rate, Pope is certainly renounced - as are many, though not all, or his works. Even Dryden was preferable to Pope despite the lewdness and "unchaste allusion" that blotted Dryden's work.<sup>1</sup> But Dryden had written an excellent epigram on Milton, which counted heavily with Cowper. Cowper's comparative estimate of Dryden and Pope is one of the rare examples of common ground with Johnson found in Cowper's views on Pope. Cowper writes that Dryden's faults "are those of a great man, and his beauties are such as Pope, with all his touching and retouching, could never equal."<sup>2</sup> A similar implication of superiority on the part of Dryden is found in Johnson's comparison of the two poets.

The notions of Dryden were formed by comprehensive speculation; and those of Pope by minute attention. There is more dignity in the knowledge of Dryden,<sup>3</sup> and more certainty in that of Pope.

1. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 17, 1782

2. To Wm. Unwin, July 11, 1780

3. Johnson's "Life of Pope", Complete Works, vol. XI, pp. 168-9



Nearly all of Cowper's judgments of Pope are given in connection with the translation of Homer. He admits that in his earlier, less critical days he was "delighted" with Pope's translation, "such a fascinating command of language was Pope endued with".<sup>1</sup> On another occasion he treats Pope's poetic excellencies rather more completely, still in relation to their inappropriateness for Homer -

I will allow his whole merit. He has written a great deal of very musical verse in his translation of Homer, but his verse is not universally such; on the contrary, it is often lame, feeble, and flat. He has, besides, occasionally a felicity of expression peculiar to himself; but it is a felicity purely modern, and has nothing to do with Homer.<sup>2</sup>

In his public statement of praise for Pope, found in the preface to his own translation, he speaks of him as "a poet whose writings have done immortal honour to his country" and numbers himself "among the warmest admirers of Mr. Pope as an original writer" granting that his translation is presented in smooth verse, generally in correct and elegant language, and in diction "often highly poetical". He sees it as natural that Pope should choose rime for his translation since rime was "a mode of writing in which he excelled every body."<sup>3</sup>

1. To Lady Hesketh, Jan. 2, 1786

2. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785

3. Cowper's pref. to Homer, "Works", vol. XI, pp. vii-ix



Even while he praises Pope's dexterity he slips into blame, so foreign to Cowper's taste is the polish of his verse and the "tintinnabulum of rime".

Then Pope, as harmony itself exact  
In verse well disciplin'd, complete, compact

• • •

But he (his musical finesse was such,  
So nice his ear, so delicate his touch)  
Made poetry a mere mechanic art;  
And ev'ry warbler has his tune by heart.<sup>1</sup>

And one is reminded of Cowper's scorn for verse that is produced by square and line, as such "mechanic art" would produce it. On this matter of Pope's method Cowper confesses himself "bound to acquiesce" to the opinion of Dr. Johnson published in the "Review". Johnson feels that Pope's method was "to write his first thoughts in his first words, and gradually to amplify, decorate, rectify, and refine them."<sup>2</sup> He examined lines and words with minute and punctilious observation, and retouched every part with indefatigable diligence . . . .<sup>3</sup> Cowper agrees that Pope "was certainly a mechanical maker of verses." he seems rather unkind in adding that "in every line he ever wrote, we see indubitable marks of the indefatigable industry and labour."<sup>4</sup> However, he does admit that whereas many authors

1. Cowper "Table Talk" lines 646-7, 652-5

2. Cowper's pref. to Homer. "Works" vol. XI, p. 165

3. Ibid., p. 167

4. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 5, 1782



of like diligence become phlegmatic as well as correct, "Pope was, in this respect, exempted from the common lot of authors of that class".<sup>1</sup> The comparison which vivifies his final estimate of this quality in Pope seems perhaps to be a glance at the neo-classic tendency to devote the perfection of its manner to trivial or inappropriate matter -<sup>2</sup>

With the unwearied application of a plodding Flemish painter, who draws a shrimp with the most minute exactness, he had all the genius of one of the first masters. Never, I believe, were such talents and such drudgery united.<sup>1</sup>

All in Cowper that was attracted by the unpolished plainness of the common things which the romanticist appreciated was repelled by the smoothness of Pope's ornamented prettiness. He might have forgiven that quality in Pope had not lesser writers got "his tune by heart" and cheapened it. He frequently mentioned with distaste Pope's fondness for a line that would "run as smooth as quicksilver". Naturally, a worshipper of Homer and Milton could hardly be expected to admire such a product. As for the imitators of Pope, Cowper's opinion on the results of their labours was at once a compliment to Pope for his superior genius and a criticism of his vicious influence.

1. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 5, 1782

2. Coleridge puts this clearly - "The matter and diction seemed to me characterized not so much by poetic thoughts, as by thoughts translated into the language of poetry." "Biographia Literaria", p. 9



Unless we could imitate him in the closeness and compactness of his expression, as well as in the smoothness of his numbers, we had better drop the imitation, which serves no other purpose than to emasculate and weaken all we write.<sup>1</sup>

When Pope's "prettiness of expression" resulted in his producing "two pretty poems under Homers titles", Cowper felt that it was time to take action. He found in Pope's translation "puerile conceits, extravagant metaphors, and the tinsel of modern embellishment in every possible position."<sup>2</sup> And if we adopt Cowper's point of view we shall see that his judgment was correct. The neo-augustine might approve of Pope, even Dr. Johnson might commend him, but the classicist whose opinion was based on enthusiastic knowledge of the original could not be satisfied. Bentley agreed with Cowper's estimate as did also Matthew Arnold at a later day.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, Cowper was not so blinded by devotion to Homer and aversion to Pope's manner that he did not recognize the merits of Pope's accomplishment. He admitted that the blemishes he found were the result of "closeness of attention" and of an examination of the charms of Pope "by the light of Homer's lamp."<sup>4</sup> In announcing his project to

1. To Joseph Johnson, n.d.

2. To Clotworthy Rowley, Feb. 21, 1782

3. "I consider that when Bentley said of Pope's translation, 'It was a pretty poem, but must not be called Homer,' the work, in spite of all its power and attractiveness, was judged." Arnold, "On Translating Homer", p. 36

4. To Lady Hesketh, Jan. 2, 1785



his friends he declared that he considered himself by no means to be on a level with Pope as a poet, but he did hope to prove his superior as a translator although he realized that one who would improve on what Pope had done would succeed only by means of "vast and invidious labour".<sup>1</sup>

To substantiate his claim that a translation of Homer was still needed, he wrote to one of his friends that he undertook the project

knowing it to have been universally the opinion of the literati ever since they have allowed themselves to consider the matter coolly, that the translation, properly so called, of Homer, is notwithstanding what Pope has done, a Desideratum in the English language . . . .<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Johnson, Dean of Christ Church, delighted Cowper greatly by his profane opinion "that Homer had never been translated, and that Pope was a D ---d fool."<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to believe that Dr. Johnson's failure to join these critics may not be traced to an insufficient knowledge of Greek, else he would hardly have been so calm in remarking that "in the most general applause discordant voices will always be heard".<sup>4</sup> Cowper, in his estimate of the opinion of Johnson, spoke of him as "the only modern writer who has spoken of it in terms

1. To Wm. Unwin, Dec. 31, 1785

2. To Joseph Hill, Dec. 24, 1785

3. To Walter Bagot, Jan. 33, 1786

4. Johnson's "Life of Pope" vol.XII in Complete Works, p. 184



of approbation". He seems justified when he says that Johnson's praise would lead one to believe "that he talked at random, that either he had never examined it by Homer's, or never since he was a boy."<sup>1</sup>

That Pope had used ornament where Homer was plain the doctor admitted, but he felt Pope to be justified in dressing up the original for his own age even if in making Homer more graceful he "lost him some of his sublimity".<sup>2</sup> Surely such docility could not have been expected had Johnson been as familiar with the original Homer as Cowper was. Besides, one must remember that Cowper appreciated Homer with a romanticist's appreciation and so was particularly devoted to his plainness. He therefore could never reconcile himself to the style of Pope's translation. "Ornament for ever! cries Pope . Simplicity for ever! cries Homer - no Two can be more opposite."<sup>3</sup> In the face of the plainness and simplicity of Homer he found Pope's trimmings intolerable.

The garden in all the gaiety of June is less flowery than his Translation. Metaphors of which Homer never dreamt . . . follow each other in quick succession,  
<sup>4</sup> like the sliding pictures in a show box.

Pope seems not to have realized that Homer's style is

1. To Lady Hesketh, Feb. 27, 1786
2. Johnson's "Life of Pope", p. 186
3. To Mrs. King, Apr. 22, 1789
4. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785



always easy and familiar, for he himself "takes most religious care that he shall every where strut in buckram."<sup>1</sup> In his pseudonymous essay in the Gentleman's Magazine, Cowper explains that Homer derived "a dignity from his plainness, to which writers more studious of ornament can never attain." This dignity Pope sacrificed to ornament in his translation, and by that same ornament lost much of the spirit of the original - "I do not deny that his flowers are beautiful - - - but they are modern discoveries, and of English growth."<sup>2</sup>

This love of ornament led Pope to a diffuseness entirely opposed to the simplicity of Homer, getting him away from the spirit of his original and so affecting the sense as to make the translation a mere paraphrase. In his Gentleman's Magazine essay Cowper illustrates the resulting weakness by discussing Pope's translation of the famous simile at the end of the eighth book. What Homer expressed in five immortal lines Pope diluted to twelve. The simile is concerned with a comparison of the kindling of the fires in the Trojan camp to the appearance of the moon and the stars on a clear night. For actual text Cowper compares Homer's simple concluding statement, "The shepherd's heart is glad," with Ecce's

1. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785

2. Gentleman's Magazine, vol. LV, part 2, London, Aug., 1785



elaborate pastoral bit - "The conscious swains, rejoicing in the sight, eve the blue vault, and bless the useful light." Cowper's comment on the comparative values of the two versions shows a penetrating perception of the inappropriate ornament which Pope has introduced.

Pope, charmed with the scene that Homer drew, was tempted to a trial to excel his master, and the consequence was, that the simile which in the original is like a pure drop, of simple lustre, in the copy is like that drop dilated into a bubble, that reflects all the colors of the bow:<sup>1</sup>

In line with Pope's policy of refinement, he not only ornamented what was plain but also polished what was rough. This resulted in a flattening of character distinctions. That ability in "discrimination of character" which Homer possessed to so high a degree it appears that Pope considered "an affair of no moment". At any rate, he "almost absolutely annihilated" it, largely by reducing the speeches of Homer's heroes "to the perfect standard of French good-breeding," if appearing that he must have accounted the language of the original "unmannerly and rude".<sup>2</sup> One finds it amusing to note that although Cowper felt the Christian subject-matter of Milton's epic to have made it superior to Homer's, he was none the less unfavorable toward any Christian element which might lessen the effectiveness of the heathen. Because of Pope's false delicacy

1. Gentleman's Magazine, Aug., 1785

2. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785



and excess polish in softening Homer's invectives the original has been "diluted with such a proportion of good Christian meekness, that all the spirit of the old bard is quenched entirely," and the invective of his heroes reduced to "nothing but the milkiness of the best good manners."<sup>1</sup> The result in characterization is that "the persons of the poems speak all one language; they are all alike, stately, porcous, and stiff."<sup>1</sup>

Part and parcel of Pope's manner was his use of rime. We have previously noted, in the section on translation, Cowper's opinion of the use of rime in translation. He granted it as natural that Pope should choose rime for his medium since he was known to excel in it. But the rime was a difficulty which had to be surmounted, a fetter which Pope had chosen. The resulting verses were smooth and poetical, but the rime of course required deviations from the original which departed from the fidelity so cherished by Cowper.<sup>2</sup> The result of the rime is similar to that of the other elements of ornament and over-polish -

. . . sometimes [Homer's] sense is suppressed, sometimes other sense is obtruded upon him; rhyme gives the word, and a miserable transformation ensues; instead of Homer in the graceful habit of his age <sup>1, 3</sup> and nation, we have Homer in a straight waistcoat.

1. Cowper's essay in Gentleman's Magazine

2. Cowper's pref. to Homer, "Works", vol. XI, pp. vii-ix

3. M. Arnold writes of this - "this balanced rhetorical antithesis is . . . entirely un-Homeric . . . Pope fails to render Homer, because he does not render his plainness and directness of style and diction." "On Translating Homer", p. 47



But deviations from the original were not occasioned solely by the exigencies of rime. Pope had obviously set out to produce an eighteenth century Homer, and in the interests of this project indulged in whatever deviation suggested itself. Dr. Johnson defended him by affirming that Pope "knew that it was necessary to colour the images and point the sentiments of his author".<sup>1</sup> Johnson declares, without being at all disturbed about the fact, that "it is not very likely that he overflowed with Greek",<sup>2</sup> and assumes that Pope used various other translations, perhaps at times "instead of the original".<sup>3</sup> Cf Pope's lack of knowledge of the Greek Cowper writes that of many passages in Homer "it is literally true" that Pope did not understand him, and assumes that at the outset "he knew very little of Greek"<sup>4</sup> and "was never an adept in it". Cf course he would not publicly challenge Pope's knowledge of Greek, but he found it necessary in his preface to explain his own deviation from Pope by admitting "that he [Pope] has sometimes altogether suppressed the sense of his author, and has not seldom intermingled his own ideas with it".<sup>5</sup> Under cover of a pseudonym he could be more explicit about the

1. Johnson's "Life of Pope", p. 186

2. Ibid., p. 79

3. Ibid., p. 80

4. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785

5. Cowper's pref. to Homer, "Works", vol. XI, p. viii



deviations,<sup>1</sup> though he leaves the reader to surmise the cause.

He is often turgid, often tame, often careless, and, to what cause it was owing I will not even surmise, upon many occasions has given an interpretation of whole passages utterly beside their meaning.<sup>2</sup>

It was clear to Cowper, that Pope was so conditioned by his own poetic niceties that "he never entered into the spirit of Homer".<sup>3</sup> Even as a schoolboy Cowper had decided "that there is hardly the thing in the world of which Pope was so entirely destitute, as a taste for Homer".<sup>4</sup> As is so often his practice, Cowper summarizes the difference between the style of Pope's Homer and his own by an illustrative simile -

I have two French prints hanging in my study both on Iliad subjects and I have an English one in the Parlour on a subject from the same poem. In one of the former Agamemnon addresses Achilles exactly in the attitude of a Dancing master turning miss in a minuet; in the latter the figures are plain and the attitudes plain also. This is in some considerable measure, I believe, the difference between my translation and Pope's . . . .<sup>5</sup>

1. A citation from Arnold's discussion will show why Cowper would certainly consider Pope's translation, as Arnold did, "extravagantly free". The Greek which translates literally - "Xanthus, why prophesiest thou my death to me? thou needest not at all" is presented by Pope as - "So let it be! Portents and prodigies are lost on me." Arnold, "On Translating Homer," p. 45
2. Cowper's essay in Gentleman's Magazine
3. To Lady Hesketh, Dec. 15, 1785
4. To Clotworthy Rowley, Feb. 21, 1788
5. To Joseph Hill, Mar. 10, 1791



When such a finical taste was carried over into letter writing, where one should of all places be plain and straight-forward, Cowper found it disgusting. Pope was the "most disagreeable Writer of Epistles" that Cowper ever met with, because he "seems to have thought that unless a sentence was well turned, and every period pointed with some conceit, it was not worth the carriage."<sup>1</sup> Apparently Cowper was not aware that these ornaments were present because the publication of the letters was Pope's own project. Otherwise he would certainly have expressed his opinion of the matter in unpolished Homeric invective. Dr. Johnson, realizing the circumstances of publication, felt that Pope "might have originally had publication in mind"<sup>2</sup> and considered the letters to be "premeditated and artificial" and written for no more commendable reason than that "ceremony or vanity require something to be written".<sup>3</sup>

The vanity displayed in the letters combined with a petulance in Pope, or so Cowper felt. He saw him and justly, as "painfully sensible of censure" and yet "restless in provocation".<sup>4</sup> Such a combination naturally bred satire,

1. To Wm. Unwin, June 8, 1780

2. Johnson's "Life of Pope", p. 119

3. Ibid., p. 157

4. To Wm. Unwin, June 8, 1780



which was "the less pardonable" in Pope because he knew the difficulties of composition.<sup>1</sup> Cowper was not averse to satire when put to proper use, but he could not accept the Dunciad as fulfilling such a task. Variant readings have shown him to be correct in his surmise that if Pope decided not to include an author at first intended for some lampoon he "thrust somebody's blockhead into the gap" whose name happened to fit it.<sup>2</sup> He expressed wonder "that the same poet who wrote the Dunciad" shculd have written "The Mercy I to others show, That mercy show to me."<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, all Cowper's romantic devotion to plainness, simplicity, and naturalness rebelled against Pope's prettiness, ornament, and mechanical smoothness. All his classical fidelity to the sense and spirit of Homer rebelled against the injury done to these by Pope's neo-classic artificialities in his translation, or should we say paraphrase. Cowper the man rebelled against the vanity shown in Pope's letters and the merciless cut of his satire. Possibly Cowper the evangelical enthusiast rebelled unconsciously against Pope, the Papist, although he was too gentle to have anything but sympathy for any hardship which that faith might have caused Pope. That the archetype of neo-classicism should presume to give the public

1. To Samuel Rose, Aug. 8, 1789

2. To J. Newton, Sept. 18, 1781



a version of Homer in neo-augustine dress - nothing could be more calculated to bring out in Cowper all those opinions on the basis of which we may affirm him to be a classical romanticist.



## X

## JOHNSON

The typical eighteenth century coloration of literary criticism by political and religious prejudice is nowhere more apparent in Cowper than in his differences with Dr. Johnson. One might almost say this is the only instance of such prejudice that we have in Cowper. Despite this, and despite the frequent differences occurring in their unprejudiced judgments, Cowper was in all his considered declarations eminently fair to Johnson, clearly aware of his greatness and the nature of it, and in general correct in indicating his faults.

Lest a casual reader might judge Cowper to be presumptuous in his attitude toward so great a man as Johnson, we should note that he recognized Johnson as "very learned and very critical" and was "not very sanguine" as to what Johnson might think of his own poems.<sup>1</sup> Knowing his great influence, he recognized "that one of his pointed Sarcasms, if he should happen to be displeased, would soon find its way into all companies."<sup>2</sup> He thought it possible the doctor might treat him with lenity because of his "subject and design" but was modest enough to suppose that the composition would "hardly escape his censure".<sup>1</sup> Nearly two years

1. To Wm. Unwin, Aug. 3, 1782

2. To J. Newton, Aug. 27, 1785



later, Cowper records his pleasure at having at last "an account of Dr. Johnson's favorable opinion of my book".

He had supposed that friends of his who were in touch with Johnson's circle had refrained from telling him the doctor's opinion lest he be hurt by adverse criticism.<sup>1</sup>

As a biographer, Johnson displayed common sense and discernment which made Cowper his "humble admirer". Cowper felt that all readers must admire "his uncommon share of good sense and his forcible expression". In general his evaluations of character were sound -

He has a penetrating insight into character, and a happy talent of correcting the popular opinion upon all occasions where it is erroneous; and this he does with the boldness of a man who will think for himself, but at the same time with a justness of sentiment that convinces us he does not differ from others thro <sup>af-</sup><sub>ection</sub>, but because he has a sounder judgment.

Such soundness of judgment Cowper would not admit to be the basis of Johnson's life of Churchill. For writing the life of this poet Cowper considers Johnson to be "entirely unqualified". In the writing Johnson proves himself a "pitiful Scribbler" and appears to have undertaken the task merely for the opportunity to traduce poor Churchill.<sup>2</sup> This latter estimate of Johnson as biographer should not be applied generally but only to the Churchill production. Cowper's friendship for Churchill naturally colored his viewpoint on this matter.

1. To J. Newton, Mar. 22, 1784

2. To Wm. Unwin, Mar. 21, 1784

3. To Wm. Unwin, n.d.



As a critic Johnson was "supreme Dictator in the chair of literature",<sup>1</sup> "a man of Gigantic talents and most profound Learning" the universality of whose knowledge one would not question.<sup>2</sup> However, such learning and knowledge seem not to have resulted in good taste. Cowper sums up the situation with considerable accuracy when he writes, "good sense, in short, and strength of intellect, seem to me, rather than fine taste, to have been his distinguishing characteristics".<sup>3</sup> Cowper was not alone in his day in holding this opinion; a contemporary reviewer indicates as one of Johnson's principal defects as a critic his "want of taste for almost all poetry except heroic and didactic".<sup>4</sup> This want of taste is shown in his inclusion in the *Lives of the Poets* of much which might better have been burned. Some of the trash included makes Cowper wonder what can be Dr. Johnson's "idea or definition of classical merit".<sup>5</sup> That Dr. Johnson "was not qualified to relish Blank Verse" did not cause Cowper to question "Johnson's true spirit of poetry" but he did think this to be "an ugly symptom".<sup>3</sup> What seemed to Cowper more indicative of a lack of poetic taste in Johnson was -

The perverse judgment that he has formed of our poets in general; depreciating some of the best, and

1. To J. Newton, Aug. 27, 1785
2. To J. Newton, Jan. 13, 1782
3. To Walter Bagot, Mar. 18, 1791
4. Item in "Monthly Review", May, 1796
5. To Wm. Unwin, May 26, 1779



asking honourable mention of others, in my opinion, not undeservedly neglected.<sup>1</sup>

Cowper was even willing to bet sixpence that Johnson would not have recognized the excellence of *Paradise Lost* had he lived in the days of Milton.<sup>1</sup> This last judgment seems rather harsh in the light of Johnson's analysis and appreciation of that poem.

If Johnson's adverse criticisms were levelled at friends of Cowper's, he condemned "that literary Cossack" for the subject matter of the criticism. However, when Cowper is judging the Doctor's entire method, he is less prejudiced and more valid in his characterization. The fault which he finds with Johnson's procedure is in line with his previously expressed objection to the critic who is fault hunting instead of allowing himself to relish the beauties of the piece under consideration. Cowper's analysis seems valid, and is strongly prophetic of Coleridge's attitude toward criticism.

But by what I have seen of his animadversions on the poets I feel myself much disposed to question in many instances, either his Candor or his Taste. He finds fault too often like a man that having sought it very industriously, is at last obliged to stick it upon a pins point and look at it through a microscope, and I am sure I could easily convict him of having denied many beauties and overlooked more.<sup>2</sup>

Cowper is not sure "whether his Judgment be in itself

1. To Walter Bagot, Mar. 18, 1791
2. To J. Newton, Jan. 13, 1782



defective or whether it be warped by collateral considerations".<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not such collateral considerations influenced Johnson, and it was the opinion of many besides Cowper that they did, a large degree of religious prejudice influenced Cowper in some of his attitudes toward Johnson. The publication of Johnson's Prayers and Meditations called forth some of this prejudiced judgment. To be sure he blames the publisher for putting out "such stuff as has a direct tendency to expose" both himself and Johnson to ridicule, and feels that he could not have been a friend either "to the cause of Religion" or "to the Author's memory". On the other hand, he expressed surprise that "any man of such learned eminence as Johnson", who knew that his every word written or spoken was considered a treasure, "should leave behind him what he would have blush'd to exhibit while he lived". The "childish register" over which he feels that Johnson would have blushed records such embarrassing Church of England items as

His prayers for the Dead, and his minute account of the rigour with which he observed Church Fasts, whether he drank Tea or Coffe, whether with sugar or without, and whether one or two dishes of either.<sup>2</sup>

Cowper feels that such a record shows "the great Johnson" to have been "almost a Driveller in his closet"<sup>2</sup> and

1. To J. Newton, Jan. 13, 1782

2. To J. Newton, Aug. 27, 1785



concludes with prejudice bordering on bigotry that the whole is "a melancholy witness to testify how much of the wisdom of this world may consist with almost infantine Ignorance of the affairs of a better . . . ." <sup>1</sup>

Such religious prejudice combined with political prejudice to widen the rift between Cowper and Johnson in their opinions of Wilton. Just as Cowper condemns Johnson for the record he left of his daily prayers and fasts, so Johnson sits in judgment on Milton because in the daily program known to have been Milton's "there was no hour of prayer" recorded.<sup>2</sup> Though Johnson condemns most of Milton's controversial prose, one of his items is noted as "modestly written, with respectful mention of the Church of England",<sup>3</sup> and one cannot forbear the thought that this same respectful mention goes far in influencing the doctor's kinder treatment of this item.

Political prejudice caused an even wider gap between Johnson and Wilton, and many were those besides Cowper who rose to the defense of Wilton.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779, Cowper says truly, though with prejudice on his side,<sup>5</sup>

A pensioner is not likely to spare a Republican; and

1. To J. Newton, Aug. 17, 1785

2. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 147

3. Ibid., p. 141

4. cf. "Monthly Review", Aug., 1779, for review of Johnson's Milton

5. Basis for such a description of Johnson's treatment of Milton is found in such statements as - "His political (cont. next p.)



the Doctor, in order, I suppose, to convince his royal patron of the sincerity of his monarchical principles, has belaboured that great poet's <sup>1</sup> character with the most industrious cruelty.

On the other hand, there is little excuse for Cowper's saying that if Milton had any virtues, "they are not found in the doctor's picture of him".<sup>1</sup> One representative sentence from among many possible examples should show that Cowper did not see what he would not see. Johnson writes -

To that multiplicity of attainments, and extent of comprehension, that entitled this great author to our veneration, may be added a kind of humble dignity, which did not disdain the meanest services to literature.<sup>2</sup>

It must be admitted that all Johnson's praise is given to Milton as a scholar and a writer rather than to Milton the man, a circumstance which Cowper may have noticed and resented, although he does not qualify his statement with such a consideration.

In their differences concerning Milton's poetry, the smaller matters seem to have been influenced, oddly enough, by a greater devotion to the classics on the part of Cowper.

(cont. from p. 167) notions were those of an acrimonious and surly Republican . . . . Milton's Republicanism was, I am afraid, founded in an envious hatred of greatness, and a sullen desire of independence; in petulance impatient of control, and pride disdainful of superiority. He hated monarchs in the State, and prelates in the Church; for he hated all whom he was required to obey." "Life of Milton", pp. 147/8

1. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779

2. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 141



He praises a pastoral because it is equal to one of Virgil's, whereas Johnson dislikes it anyway because it is a pastoral, no matter how excellent it may be in its class. A similar circumstance leads Cowper to praise in Lycidas "the classical spirit of antiquity" which Johnson condemns as "a long train of mythological imagery", as we have previously mentioned. Posterity has seconded Cowper in his praise of "the liveliness of the description" and "the sweetness of the numbers"<sup>1</sup> in Lycidas; whereas Johnson's idea that "the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing"<sup>2</sup> seems only to confirm Cowper's opinion that "he has no ear for poetical numbers, or that it was stopped by prejudice against the harmony of Milton's".<sup>1</sup> Here in this one poem we have Cowper differing from Johnson first because Cowper is more classical and again because he is more in line with the romantic pioneers in his enthusiasm for Milton's "numbers".

As for Paradise Lost and its blank verse, both Cowper and Johnson admired it, although once more Cowper seemed determined to notice only the adverse criticisms of Johnson. Being himself enthusiastic over blank verse, he was intolerant of the doctor's coolness toward it. He learned from a statement of Johnson's that the doctor had never been able to read blank verse musically. This seemed one more indication that either prejudice or lack

1. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779

2. Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 153



of taste was the explanation of Johnson's want of enthusiasm for blank verse. After praising the music of Paradise Lost, which he considered to be in a large degree the result of variety of pause, Cowper condemns Johnson for having no more to say on the matter than "something about the unfitness of the English language for blank verse,<sup>1</sup> and how art it is, in the mouth of some readers, to degenerate into declamation".<sup>2</sup> Possibly this so angered Cowper that he threw the book down. Otherwise it is difficult to account for his failure to mention the high compliment which Johnson pays to Milton and to blank verse, this compliment to be found just one paragraph removed from the displeasing material. Johnson writes -

But, whatever be the advantages of rhyme, I cannot prevail on myself to wish that Milton had been a rhymers; for I cannot wish his work to be other than it is; . . . he that thinks himself capable of astonishing may write blank verse; but those that hope only to please must condescend to rhyme.<sup>3</sup>

Carefully considered this should refute the opinion of Cowper, and of many since his day (Hoffmann included), that Johnson placed rhyme above blank verse as a poetic type.

1. Johnson writes, "The variety of pauses, so much boasted by the lovers of blank verse, changes the measures of an English poet to the periods of a declaimer; and there are only a few skilful and happy readers of Milton, who enable their audience to perceive where the lines end or begin. Blank verse, said an ingenuous critick, seems to be verse only to the eye." Johnson's "Life of Milton", p. 181

2. To Wm. Unwin, Oct. 31, 1779

3. Johnson's "Life of Milton", pp. 181/2



Religious prejudice again separated these two in their discussion of Watts, the hymn writer. As a man Johnson commended him, but of his poetry said that "It is sufficient for Watts to have done better than others what no man has done well . . ." <sup>1</sup> Cowper agreed with the favorable comment, but in the matter of divine subjects for poetry he said unkindly, "A little more Christian knowledge and Experience would perhaps enable him to discover excellent poetry upon spiritual themes in the aforesaid little Doctor." <sup>2</sup>

That religious fervor which assisted in a defense of Watts was set aside when friendship made necessary a defense of Churchill. We have discussed the defense against Johnson's life; a similar effort was made for his poetry. Considerations which would have led Cowper to condemn another man's poetry are here mentioned merely as asides. For example, of his poem the Times Cowper writes, after high praise of some other poems - "and the Times, except that the Subject is disgusting to the last degree, stands equally high in my opinion". Poems of which one hears no mention today Cowper terms "noble" and "beautiful", "masterly", "full of Strength and Spirit." It seems apparent that the natural preference of friendship was strengthened by the "bold Masculine Character"

1. Johnson, "Complete Works", vol. 11, p. 247

2. To J. Newton, Dec. 4, 1781



cf Churchill's verse which was very evidently the natural effusion of genius, unpolished and unhampered by rules.

In the heat of his wrath Cowper terms Johnson a "Simpleton" for having thought himself a judge of Churchill's writings, and goes on to say that those writings are excellent,

"unless I am a greater Blockhead than he Johnson."<sup>1</sup> One would hesitate to turn Cowper's own phrase against him, but time seems to indicate that whereas Cowper was the more able judge of Wilton, Johnson was the more judicious in estimating Churchill.<sup>2</sup>

Friendship again influenced Cowper in his opinion of Prior, but this time his differences with Johnson's opinions are more valid, better sustained, and more in line with the usual judgment upon Prior.<sup>3</sup> What seems to have distressed Cowper most is Johnson's emphasis on the labored quality of Prior's verse. The doctor grants the poems to be excellent in many ways, but always insists that the product is the

1. To Wm. Unwin, n.d.

2. Johnson's treatment may have been tinged with a little prejudice against Churchill for his having exposed Johnson as over-credulous in the affair of the Cock Lane Ghost. cf. Monthly Review, May 1787, and Gentleman's Magazine, Feb., 1762.

3. One Reviewer wrote - "In characterizing the poetry of Matthew Prior, Dr. Johnson, in more instances than one, deviates from the general opinion of its excellence . . ." Monthly Review, Nov. 1781



result of much labor. This seems to cut Prior in the class of writers who are too much concerned with polish and not sufficiently impelled by natural genius. Cowper grants that Prior's reputation was that of "an author who, with much labour indeed, but with admirable success, has embellished all his poems with the most charming ease" and then traduces Johnson for accentuating that laboured quality. Cowper considers the labor to have been necessary since Prior's works are presented in the very difficult style of familiar verse.<sup>1</sup>

Again there is difference of opinion between Cowper and the Doctor because of difference in training. Johnson questions the sincerity of Prior's passion because he has introduced Venus and Cupid into his love verses, remarking that "in his amorous diantry he exhibited the college." Cowper very likely exhibits the college when he points out that Tibullus mentions these deities on almost every page though in reality he "disbelieved their existence as much as we do; yet Tibullus is allowed to be the prince of all poetical inamorates." He assumes that the Doctor has forgotten that "there is a fashion in these things".<sup>1</sup> Once more Cowper is more the classicist than Johnson in allowing the characteristic usages of a type of poetry no matter how these items accord with common sense.

1. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 5, 1782



When Cowper was engaged in the defense of one of his youthful enthusiasms, all the spirit of the middle-aged Christian was put aside. Johnson's criticism of the plot of Prior's "Henry and Emma", (essentially the plot of "The Nut Brown Maid") Cowper called his "old fusty-rusty remarks", although he agreed that the characters were bad and their example not to be followed. What annoyed him particularly was the doctor's calling it "dull dialogue". Knowing how many had found it delightful, he wondered almost that "the boys and girls do not tear this husky, dry commentator limb from limb . . . ." <sup>1</sup> In this he was seconded by contemporary reviewers. <sup>2</sup> Cowper is hardly justified in saying of Johnson's criticism, "He pours contempt upon Prior, to such a degree, that were he really as undeserving of notice as he represents him, he ought no longer to be numbered among the poets." <sup>3</sup> However, Cowper does prove himself to be on this occasion a more valid critic than Johnson.

1. To Wm. Unwin, Jan. 5, 1782

2. A contemporary reviewer accords general agreement to Johnson's moral strictures on "Henry and Emma" but adds - "It is at the same time much to be doubted whether many will agree with him in thinking it a dull and tedious dialogue. Were the question to be asked, which of Prior's poems has been most generally read? we are of opinion, it would be determined in favour of 'Henry and Emma'. What everyone reads can hardly be thought tedious and dull." "Monthly Review", Nov. 1781.

3. To Wm. Unwin, Mar. 21, 1784



Of writers whom Johnson approved, Cowper disapproves in the case of Pope and Blackmore. We have pointed out the disagreement in the matter of Pope's Homer. Cowper considers Johnson to have given unwarranted praise to Blackmore, for, "Though he shines in his poem called Creation, he has written more absurdities in Verse than any Writer of our Country . . ."<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, Johnson gives real praise only to the poem "Creation", and to the other work only faint approval.

Hannah More was one of the few literati of their period who was connected in the way of friendship with both Cowper and Dr. Johnson. As a bluestocking she was an acquaintance of Lady Hesketh's, and her friendship with Dr. Johnson is well known. Here for once the prejudices of the two were common. Hannah More was a favorite writer of Cowper's; he thought her verses "neatly executed and handsomely turned",<sup>2</sup> and that she had "more nerve and energy both in her thoughts and language than all the rhymers in the kingdom."<sup>3</sup> He declared that he admired "all that Miss More writes".<sup>4</sup>

The almost complete harmony of opinion between Cowper and Dr. Johnson in their estimates of Thomson seems truly indicative. One finds it natural that Cowper should find Thomson "admirable in description", agreeing with Dr.

1. To J. Newton, Sept. 18, 1781
2. To Lady Hesketh, Apr. 26, 1792
3. To Lady Hesketh, Feb. 16, 1788
4. To Lady Hesketh, Mar. 31, 1788



Johnson that his work is better when he describes what he knows and so wishing that he had confined himself to his native country. Odd indeed is the chief difference between the two. Cowper accuses Thomson of having "somewhat of affectation in his stile" and feels that "his numbers are sometimes not well harmonized".<sup>1</sup> Johnson, on the other hand, declares that "his is one of the works in which blank verse seems properly used"<sup>2</sup> and gives a reasoned defense of his position. Johnson's criticism of Thomson seems one of few in which he allows himself to be completely charmed by what he reads and so on this occasion utilizes the kind of appreciative criticism which Cowper advocates. Such a method has betrayed the good doctor into a revelation of the degree to which his common sense was capable of acquiescing to romantic enthusiasm.<sup>3</sup>

Cowper was impressed with the naturalness of Johnson's letters and declared himself pleased with them chiefly because "though on all other occasions he wrote like nobody, in his letters he expresses himself somewhat

1. To Mrs. King, June 19, 1788

2. Johnson's "Life of Thomson". Complete works, vol. 11, p. 235

3. "The poet leads us through the appearances of things as they are successively varied by the vicissitudes of the year, and imparts to us so much of his own enthusiasm, that our thoughts expand with his imagery, and kindle with his sentiments." Johnson's "Life of Thomson", pp. 235-6



in the stile of other folks."<sup>1</sup> Cowper's insistence on naturalness in letters would make him particularly impressed at finding this quality in those of Johnson whose prose was otherwise a sort of pomposus euphuism.

The biographers of Johnson most in vogue during the years following his death were Sir John Hawkins and James Boswell. Both of these Cowper terms coxcombs though for different reasons. Sir John deserved the name in his own right, and both were such in their attitude toward Johnson.

<sup>2</sup> Reviews of the day pointed this out. Public reviewers were much more severe on Hawkins<sup>3</sup> than was Cowper, who found in his biography "undoubtedly some awkwardness of phrase, and, which is worse, here and there some unequivocal indications of vanity not easily pardonable in a man of <sup>4</sup>his years". From the two biographies Cowper felt he had

1. To Lady Hesketh, July 5, 1783

2. Introductory statement to review of Boswell's biography of Johnson - "Among the numerous friends, the admirers, we are tempted to add, idolizers, of Johnson, (for the admiration of some, however justly founded, has been carried to a length little short of idolatry) Mr. Boswell is well known." Monthly Review, Jan. 1792.

3. "As an EGOTIST, Sir John makes no inconsiderable figure; For this he prepares us in the outset, observing, that many writers affect to speak in the third person, but for his part, he chuses to appear in HIS OWN PERSON, and these little EGOTISMS he thinks a grace to his composition." (Selections which follow prove him to be pretty thoroughly deserving of Cowper's title for him - coxcomb) Monthly Review, July, 1787

4. To Samuel Rose, Feb. 19, 1789



become quite a master of Johnson's character and regretted, as have others then and since, "that our bards of other times found no such biographers".<sup>1</sup> In Boswell's "Tour to the Hebrides" Cowper found much "trash", but now and then "the doctor speaks like an oracle, and that makes amends for all".<sup>2</sup>

Cowper's epitaph on Dr. Johnson indicates that, despite their differences in opinion and prejudice, he admired Dr. Johnson as a man and as a scholar. He speaks of him as a sage "whom to have bred may well make England proud", and praises his writing for his "eloquence", "wisdom", and "virtue". In the final analysis small prejudices were forgotten.

In summarizing Cowper's attitude toward Johnson one can hardly dismiss those prejudices from the picture. They played a large part on both sides, in their literary opinions. Having admitted this, we may consider what is revealed in Cowper, besides these prejudices. Once more we find him differing from another because he is at the same time more classical and more romantic. His appreciation of classical types and styles surpasses that of Johnson in his opinion of Milton's and Prior's classical allusions. His romanticism is seen in an enthusiasm for

1. To Samuel Rose, Feb. 19, 1789

2. To Samuel Rose, June 5, 1789



Milton and the Miltonic comparable to the enthusiasm of the Romantic pioneers and quite foreign to Johnson's nature, although Johnson had great admiration for Milton's genius. His romanticism is seen again in his praise of the natural genius of Churchill, and the familiar style of Frier. Once more one feels justified in applying to Cowper the name - classical romanticist.



## XI

## FINAL ESTIMATE OF COWPER AS A CRITIC

The accumulation of criticism in the foregoing chapters takes on added significance when one realizes its unique quality. Had Cowper been one of a literary "school" his opinions would be of little or no importance, since they would merely re-echo those of his associates. However, detached as he was from outside influence, the similarities and differences in respect of his opinions and those of the critics of his day have more value than they would otherwise have. It becomes evident that the gay round of the eighteenth century metropolis was bound to cloy on any really sensitive personality, even one as gay and carefree as Cowper's was in his Temple days; that the best classical training of the school was certain to eventuate in a distaste for neo-classicism; and that a turning from both the metropolis and neo-classicism would almost certainly result in that love of nature and the simple life which we have come to regard as fundamentals of romanticism.

Thus in the development of William Cowper it is possible to study in isolation the trends of the mid-eighteenth century. Had he been writing in the earliest eighteenth century, his classical enthusiasm would probably have been absorbed in neo-classicism. Had he



been writing when the earliest romantic pioneers flourished, he would perhaps have been as ridiculous as they in enthusiasm for over-romanticized, gothic-flavored graveyards, hooting owls, and ivy-mantled towers. As it was, his gayest period came at exactly the time best calculated to reveal to him the absurdities in neoclassicism and early romanticism, (cf. Cowper's "Dissertation on the Modern Cde") hence he was spared the excesses of both. Since his poetry and his criticism are products of later life they have not the youthful dash which might make them more arresting. On the other hand, they have that value previously mentioned - they are testimonies to the fact that the romantic enthusiasm for simple subjects simply presented by unhampered genius, which had its culmination in Coleridge and Wordsworth, was no manufactured literary enthusiasm but a natural outgrowth of the life and thought of the times even in one so unconcerned as Cowper, in so detached a locality as Olney.

Let it be remembered that in naming Cowper a classical romanticist we place him at the half way mark in the development of romanticism. Although he was fond of the idea of the poet as "vates", he by no means considered himself a prophet, nor was he. He was a man of his day, and as such embodies in his thinking and writing many of its trends. Nothing is more natural and timely than his



evangelical "enthusiasm". Knowing that the term was used in a derogatory sense, he was still willing to apply it to himself. During the period when the influence of John Newton was strongest over him, he was almost completely pre-occupied with things religious and wrote meditations which one would think he would have blushed over even more than he felt Dr. Johnson should blush for his. He also wrote many among the Olney Hymns which have come to be a cherished part of evangelical religious tradition - such hymns as "God moves in a mysterious way" and "Jesus, where'er thy people meet". This religious outlook increased his devotion to Milton and decreased his sympathy for Johnson - that is, it tended to strengthen the romantic trend in his thinking.

More exactly dated than his religious fervor is his devotion to elisions in writing. Any discussion he presents of that problem makes no appeal to the modern reader. Likewise dated are some of his enthusiasms for minor writers of his day. In the case of Churchill, friendship influenced him over strongly. In the case of Blackmore and of Hannah More he was joined by no less a critic than Dr. Johnson in greatly over-estimating what has proved worthy of moderate commendation. In his criticism of Burns he was really



ahead of his day in recognizing considerable value in what many were willing to condemn outright. Nevertheless, and perhaps parsonably so, he was too much the classicist to see Burns's language as anything but barbarous, and was not sufficiently forward-looking to foresee his later, well-deserved popularity..

Classical literature was as familiar to Cowper as English literature is to us. References to less well known writers like Lucilius and Tibullus came natural to him. While such writers as Ovid, Horace, Virgil, or Homer were the first in his mind if comparisons were to be made or authorities cited. His condemnation of Pope's Homer for lack of fidelity to the original is sufficient indication that his references to the classics were based on sound knowledge and appreciation of their content rather than on neo-classic hearsay. This intimacy with the classics and partiality to their method made him a reactionary in his championing of quantitative prosody. His classical enthusiasm was also prominent in his liking for those classical elements in Milton and Prior of which Dr. Johnson disapproved. Addison too, he commended for his "Attic taste". In the foregoing instances his classicism was unadulterated by any contemporary consideration, except in the case of Homer. There he had a strongly romantic enthusiasm for Homer's simplicity of



style and objected to Pope's ornamentation as a large item in his infidelity to the original. The classic doctrine of poetry as valuable when it delights in order to teach Cowper embraced whole-heartedly. But in his interpretation it underwent an evangelical metamorphosis, and became the underlying principle of his romantic interest in nature - he would present the beauties of nature that he might inspire a divine delight in his readers and so arouse in them a real sense of the wonder <sup>1</sup> of the Creator. That which is classic in Cowper is more genuinely so than anything in the neo-classicists. His appreciation of the classics was on an independent, romantic basis. That is, as a romanticist he admired them as products of individual genius for their own sakes and for what he as an individual saw in them to commend. An exception to this statement suggests itself in the case of the pastoral; one must attribute his praise of Virgil's pastorals purely to classic devotion to the poet, for Cowper's love of simplicity and truth to nature could never have accorded considerable praise to those highly artificial effusions except in judging them as perfect specimens of a type, artificial though the type be.

1. Sainte-Beuve sees this religious purpose as a strong influence in making Cowper's poetry so exact in detail - "A son point de vue religieux, on l'a remarqué, un petit détail lui semble, en effet, aussi important qu'un grand objet: tous s'égalisent par rapport à Dieu qui brille et se révèle aussi merveilleusement dans les uns que dans les autres." "Profils Anglais", p. 245



Such devotion to the classics, reactionary as it was in some of its aspects, seems actually to have been completely detached from his romanticism and to have acted in no way as a check on it except perhaps in the case of the language of Burns. Cowper's choice of subject-matter for poetry was as we have pointed out romantic with an evangelical purpose. "God made the country and man made the town", and so praise of God must come through praise of nature.<sup>1</sup> Romantic again is his fondness for the "elegance of simplicity", for a style which makes a natural appeal as does some "cottage beauty" unadorned by art. His romantic fellow-feeling for all humanity made satire distasteful to him unless it were used with a moral or religious purpose. We have already noted the romantic quality of his appreciation for Homer, for his great original genius and for his sublime simplicity.

Among the romantic pioneers in English poetry, Thomson appealed because of his admirable description, Gray was termed "sublime", Goldsmith appealed in both manner and matter, and Burns was recognized as a real genius but

1. Sainte-Beuve describes his work as "une poésie qui naissait de sa vie même et des circonstances qui l'environnaient. . . . ses rouges-gorges, ses chardonnerets avaient leur rôle et amenaient leur morale toujours humaine et sensible, bien que puritaine." Profils Anglais, pp. 224-5



thought to have hid his candle in the dark lantern of a barbarous language. Throughout, this romantic enthusiasm is seen to be a reasoned one. Although classicism did not check it, classicism did give a sense of balance, thus sparing Cowper from a blind devotion to the effusions of individual genius. To his training in classical restraint Cowper owes that respect for the inward sense of correctness which enabled him to be eminently reasonable in his rejection of both neo-classic outward rules and over-romantic unregulated license.

Such a balance between extremes gave to his critical thinking unbiased, undated validity. The simplicity he advocates is a valid principle for all writing. Its universal application is well illustrated in the simile he used in discussing over-polish; anyone can appreciate the fact that there is a certain bloom on a plum which if polished away detracts from the charm of the unpolished fruit. Close companion to this simplicity is energy, another quality which is lost in over-polish. Perhaps more basic than either of these two is clearness. Cowper advised that what is not clear upon first reading is not worth writing. One could compile from Cowper's critical advice a primer of composition that would be basic for all types of writing.

His devotion to poetry and to the classics did not



prevent him from seeing the flaws of inexperience in the work of Lucilius. Some of Lucilius's difficulties he attributed to the fact that he wrote at a time when Roman verse was in an early state of development and so was not so artfully constructed, and observed that "such has been the versification of the earliest poets in every country. Children lispe, at first, and stammer; but, in time, their speech becomes fluent, and, if they are well taught, harmonious."<sup>1</sup> Here in figurative language is Cowper's recognition of careful training as necessary for good poetry. He would probably feel that the proper training would include the study not only of composition but also of religious and moral principles. Such a combination would be necessary in order to be able to delight and in order that through delight one might teach the proper thing. For the aim of poetry was to delight the reader in order to teach him the glory of the Creator and the necessity to praise him in word and deed.

Such a lofty conception of the aim of poetry is really a slightly individualized version of the underlying principle of all great art. It is therefore natural that this conception resulted in Cowper's universally valid criticisms of such great literature as the Bible,

1. Cowper's preface to Homer. Southey, "Works", vol. XI, pp. xx-xxi



Homer, and Milton. His enthusiasm for these three great classics is a fair index to his classical romanticism. The Bible represents the Hebraic element, whereas Homer represents the Hellenic; in Milton the two are combined as nowhere else. All three together represent high purpose, simplicity, restraint, and sublimity - expressed through the individual genius. There are the triple embodiment of Cowper's literary creed.

A critic who judged on these principles could never be petty. And Cowper had not use for the petty, carping critic who judged all on the narrow basis of rules, who sought rather to denounce than to praise, looked for faults rather than beauties, and considered a piece of writing from the viewpoint of one who came to sit in judgment rather than to enjoy and appreciate.

Surely it is not personal fondness for this gentle observer of literary works and ways which leads this writer to see in him a model of "the golden mean". His life, his poetry, and his criticism demonstrate the possibility of a certain monotony in such a course. On the other hand, they demonstrate the value of moderation. Rigid classicism would be better if conditioned by romanticism; over indulgence in romanticism would be the better if governed by a certain degree of classic restraint. Literature as a whole and criticism in



particular should be the better for a careful consideration of the critical theory and practice of William Cowper. To organize his criticism in such a way as to make clear his theory and practice has been the purpose of this treatment. Out of such organization has developed an increasing conviction that the underlying principles of his criticism are to be valued not only for their intrinsic merits but also for their significance in demonstrating the inevitability of Cowper's classical romanticism.



## APPENDIX

The following is a classified list of all authors upon whom Cowper has expressed a critical opinion, whether or not that opinion is included in the present work.

1. Classical Poets: Homer, Horace, Lucilius, Tibullus, Virgil.
2. Major English Poets: Addison, Burns, Dryden, Goldsmith, Gray, Milton, Pope, Thomson.
3. Minor Poets, English and other: Blackmore (Sir Richard), Hawkins Brown, Cadwallader, Walter Churche, Churchill, Timothy Dwight, Garrick, Richard Glover, Hayley, Huntingford, James Hurdis, Dr. Jortin, Lavater, Lloyd, Lowth, Prior.
4. Historical Writers: Sir Richard Baker, Gibbon, Josephus, Newton, Robertson, Tacitus.
5. Religious Writers: Carraccioli, Mme. Guyon, Hervey, Madan, Marshall, Hannah More, Bishop Newton, John Newton, Fearsall, Abbe Raynal.
6. Critics: Dr. Beattie, Hugh Blair, Davil Hume, Johnson, Vicesimus Knox, John Pinkerton.
7. Grammarians: Busby, Lily.
8. Writers on Travel: Capt. Brydone, Capt. Cook, Hawkesworth.



9. Fiction Writers: Bunyan, Fielding, Mackenzie, Charlotte Smith, Smollett, Sterne.
10. Translators: George Chapman, Hobbes, Twining, Villoison.
11. Letter Writers: Chesterfield, Gray, Dr. Johnson, Mrs. Montagu, John Newton, Swift.
12. Miscellaneous: John Barclay, Boswell, Hawkins, Lunardi, Thomas Paine.



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# THE CRITICISM OF WILLIAM COWPER

## Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

BOSTON UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL

By

EDITH LAWTON

B.R.E., Boston University, 1928

A.M., Boston University, 1930

Department: English

Field of Specialization: Literary Criticism

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1941

This study aims to establish Cowper as a critic, to show that his criticism like his poetry is that of a classical romanticist, and to indicate his importance in the development of criticism. This work is necessary because the bulk of Cowper's criticism has not been previously realized nor has its importance yet been indicated. The two previous attempts to accomplish this are inadequate. My own Master's thesis, "William Cowper as a Representative of Eighteenth Century Criticism," presents a fairly complete compilation of Cowper's critical pronouncements; it lacks a carefully worked out organization of materials revealing the basic principles of Cowper's criticism, and complete evaluation of that criticism with a placing of his work in the development of criticism. Willy Hoffmann's doctoral dissertation, "William Cowpers Belesenheit und Literarische Kritik", is mainly concerned with a calendar of Cowper's reading. Its brief section on Cowper's criticism lacks significant organization and is woefully incomplete in its research and inaccurate in evaluation. The reworking of this material is therefore necessary to achieve an evaluation of Cowper's criticism, and a placing of Cowper as a critic.

A review of the development of romantic poetry, with a treatment of the contribution of each of the pioneers is followed by a discussion of Cowper's place in the development of romantic poetry. Cowper is shown to represent the mid-point in the development of romanticism. A comparison of his work with that of Burns demonstrates this, as do his practices in form and diction. Romantic elements in his subject-matter are—his interest in flowers and animals, with an insight into their larger significance; a love of man limited by his social position, deepened by his religious fervor, and broadened by his humanitarianism; and a condemnation of the evils of the city in contrast to the joys of the country. Much of this latter is brought out through descriptions of domestic details. This romantic subject-matter is presented through the medium of classical diction and prosody.

The difficulties of forming an estimate of Cowper as a critic are notable. One of these is the necessity of large dependance for his critical pronouncements on letters, supplying material more prejudiced and less carefully considered than material prepared for publication. The published prefaces and commentaries supply more considered material. All sources present much general, constructive criticism of sound value and consistent conception.

Cowper possessed those qualifications which he felt a critic should have: he was a creative writer, he read for pleasure, and he had a fairly broad viewpoint on literary matters. He had no interest in nor respect for higher criticism. He felt criticism to be of value in setting limits to a writer's genius, and in guiding public opinion. He required that a critic admit error, cite examples to substantiate his views, respect the personal character of the writer criticized, and be interesting in presenting his material. He was particularly averse to criticism by rules, and felt only such rules to be valid as came from the writer's impulse to correctness. He was a romanticist in his revolt against the neo-classicist's interpretation of the classics, and a classicist in his interpretation of what came to be romanticism; therefore, he may well be termed a classical romanticist.

In his general principles for composition, Cowper is influenced by his own period in his views on elision and compound epithets, and in some of his grammatical principles. His comments are universally valid on parentheses,

technical terms, revision, clearness, and description. He makes significant somewhat dated comment on metaphors, similes, mixed figures, and allegory. Satire he approves only for moral and religious purposes. He champions simplicity and the familiar in prose style, with comment on historians, letter-writing, argumentation, narrative, the sentimental novel, and the drama. In his constructive criticism Cowper is actuated mainly by clear, unbiased common sense, very little influenced by the prevailing opinions of his time, definitely opposed to the major neo-classic principles, somewhat swayed by classical sympathies. In a word—a classical romanticist.

He conceives of poetry as a high calling, the purpose of which is to delight in order to teach. The true genius scorns imitation and is free from any outward rules. Fit subjects for poetry are such as may praise the Creator. Matter is more important than manner, simplicity is important, and energy is more desirable than smoothness. Quantitative prosody is defended. Blank verse is considered more difficult than rime, and is preferable to it. Treatment of the variation of pause, the language, and the punctuation of blank verse is extensive. Other poetic types considered are epic, sonnet, ballad, pastoral, and ode. Individual opinions are included on Thomson, Gray, Goldsmith, and Burns. All opinions are notably free from the bias of a set of rules or narrow prejudices. Throughout, there is a fairly even balance between classic reserve and romantic appreciation of individual genius.

In discussing language and translation, Cowper considers the excellencies and limitations of the English language, and somewhat of the French. Latin and Greek he praises highly, especially Greek. For translation he condemns the slavishly close and the loosely paraphrased, and advises a compromise between the two. He indicates the errors in Pope's and in Chapman's translations of Homer, and gives the guiding principles of his own, enumerating the difficulties encountered. His opinions on language and translation are chiefly classical, but in his devotion to the original classics rather than to notions about them or opinions drawn from them he is so opposite to the neo-classicists as to be in this way a romanticist.

Homer is admired above all the other classical writers. No credence is given to the higher critical doubts of his authorship except in the case of poorer passages. His virtues are praised highly, but his faults are mentioned also. He is particularly admired for simplicity of style and descriptive power, and his influence upon Milton is regarded as a contribution to Milton's greatness. Cowper's admiration for Homer is based on an independent appreciation of such elegant simplicity and fidelity to nature as would characterize a romanticist.

Milton holds a place comparable to that of Homer. Numerous individual poems are considered for their various excellencies, but major consideration is given to *Paradise Lost*. This is seen to be strongly influenced by Homer and on various occasions to surpass him in excellence. The poem is praised for its excellencies of composition, its effective elisions, its manipulation of pause, its use of irregular lines, its diction and noble use of the English language, and its superb imaginative quality. Cowper's praise of Milton displays a combination of devotion to Homer, to classical antiquity, to the English language, and to evangelical fervor. He is again a classical romanticist.

Pope is praised for his command of language, felicity of expression, and mastery of rime; he is condemned for the mechanical quality of his verse, its smoothness, prettiness, and ornament. His translation of Homer is condemned

for ornament, diffuseness, over-polish, the limitations of its rime in reproducing the spirit of Homer, and above all for its deviations from the sense of the original. In short, it is characterized as inappropriate to the original in every way. Pope's letters are condemned for their vanity and his satires for their meanness. All Cowper's romantic devotion to plainness, simplicity, and naturalness rebels against Pope's prettiness, ornament and mechanical smoothness. All his classical fidelity to the sense and spirit of Homer rebels against having these neo-classic artificialities present in Pope's so-called translation of that classic.

Dr. Johnson is commended for his common sense as a biographer and recognized as eminent as a critic. His criticism is condemned for his lack of taste, his lack of appreciation of blank verse, and his over-minuteness in fault finding. His religious writing is condemned. He is likewise condemned for his adverse criticisms of Milton, Watts, Churchill, and Prior, and for his favorable criticism of Blackmore and of Pope's Homer. Cowper agrees with him in praising Hannah More and Thomson. He commends his letters, is pleased with Hawkin's and Boswell's biographies of him, and feels him to be a great man and a great scholar. The differences between Johnson and Cowper were occasioned at times by Cowper's narrower classicism and at other times by his broader romanticism.

A final estimate of Cowper as a critic shows him to have been influenced by his day in his evangelical interests, in some of his ideas on style, and in some of his opinions of minor writers. His classical reserve is evident in his classical background and in his defense of quantitative prosody. It is seen also in his praise of the classical elements in Milton, Prior, and Addison, and to some extent in his conception of the purpose of poetry as to delight in order to teach. His romantic leanings are seen in his aversion to empty rules, his choice of subject-matter, his ideas on manner of treatment, his attitude toward satire, and his attitude toward Homer. They also influence his opinions of Thomson, Gray, Goldsmith, and Burns.

He contributes sound doctrine and makes sound observations valid for any period. Examples of this follow: his insistence on simplicity, energy, and clearness in composition; his views on the development and the aim of poetry; his appreciation of the Bible, of Homer, and of Milton; and his conception of criticism as intelligently appreciative rather than petty.

Out of this organization of the critical theory and practice of William Cowper has developed an increasing conviction that the underlying principles of his criticism are valuable not only for their intrinsic merits but also for their significance in demonstrating the inevitability of Cowper's classical romanticism.

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## AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF EDITH LANTON

I was born on March 3, 1905 in Bolton, Lancashire, England, the second of the two daughters of Frederick Thomas and Margaret Ellen (Chalk) Lawton. Later in the same year the family emigrated to the United States and established a home in North Easton, Massachusetts. My elementary and secondary education were completed in the public schools of that town. In 1921 I was graduated from the Oliver Ames High School, of North Easton. After three years of clerical work, chiefly as a payroll clerk in a Brockton shoe factory, I entered DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana. In the fall of 1925 I transferred to the Boston University School of Religious Education and Social Service and was graduated in 1929 with the degree of Bachelor of Religious Education. The next ten years were spent at Boston University in concentration upon English Language and Literature, qualifying for the degree of Master of Arts. This degree was secured in 1930. During the academic year 1929-30 I was instructor in Advanced Composition and American Literature in the Department of Religious Education of Boston University. The summer of 1930 I spent traveling in Europe, with special attention to literary shrines in England. In the year 1930-31 I taught Advanced Composition, American Literature,



and English Literature in the Department of Religious Education at Boston University. The years of 1931-33 were spent in further graduate study in English Language and Literature at Radcliffe College. Financial considerations terminated this study before the work for a doctor's degree was completed. During the academic year of 1933-34 I served as dean of girls at Genesee Wesleyan Seminary, Lima, New York, and taught English subjects in the junior college. From 1935 to 1940 I served as dean of girls and instructor in English at the Wheeler School, North Stonington, Connecticut. During the year 1940-41 I have acted as graduate assistant in the English Department of Boston University College of Liberal Arts, have done guidance work with the Boston University Placement Bureau, and have taught Victorian Poetry at Calvin Coolidge College.









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